



When non-Christians are asked to believe in the resurrection, some struggle with the possibility that [Jesus died on the cross, his tomb was found empty, and he appeared in bodily form to his followers](#) a few days afterward. Why is this hard to believe? Because it requires one to accept that supernatural events can occur. In our increasingly naturalistic/materialistic society, we try to find natural explanations for everything. One such theory offered to explain the Resurrection event is that the disciples may have experienced a hallucination of Jesus due to their grief at his loss.

On the surface, this theory may sound possible because we've all been through grief when we lost a loved one. We know how badly we wish we could see that loved one again. Sometimes, family members will report smelling their loved one's perfume, or cologne, or the cigars they used to smoke. Some will even report seeing their loved one out of the corner of their eye. Or maybe they see the deceased in the face of some random stranger on



the street. This all sounds perfectly reasonable - knowing ourselves what grief feels like. But, when someone tells us this, we don't think that the deceased person *actually* appeared to that person physically. We attribute it to the person's wish to see their lost loved one again.

### **A Reminder On Possible vs. Reasonable**

If you've followed along as we discuss alternate Resurrection theories, you know the difference between what is possible and what is reasonable. Remember that we live our lives based on what is reasonable, and not what is merely possible. It is *possible* that today they will discover a cure for Diabetes. Based on this possibility, should I turn to a life of chocolate cake and Mint Oreo Blizzards because they won't affect my blood sugar anymore? Or should I stick to the more reasonable approach and eat like my doctors tell me to until research of this new cure has been proven effective? Look, I'll accept any excuse I can to eat a Mint Oreo Blizzard. But, it wouldn't be reasonable for me to think that's OK even though the possibility exists that a cure is on the horizon. As we work through the theories of the Resurrection, keep in mind that we should not accept what is merely possible as the answer; we need to carefully study the evidence and come to a reasonable conclusion.

### **Does The Hallucination Theory Offer A Good Explanation Of The Evidence?**

For us to consider this theory we have to see if it addresses the main facts as we have established them - Jesus died on the cross, he was buried in a tomb, the tomb was found empty, his followers reported seeing him shortly afterwards, and experienced an impact event that changed their lives dramatically. This theory lines up with our first fact - Jesus actually died. And it covers the third fact - the disciples saw something that changed their lives. But, as we review some of the other facts, you'll see that this is about as far as it comes to being reasonable.

### **What Is A Hallucination?**

A hallucination is the perception of something that isn't there. It's your mind playing tricks on you. Notice that it's *your* mind. It's a personal experience. Because it takes place in your mind it cannot be shared by anyone else. There are no documented cases of group hallucinations. Groups of people may be tricked into seeing something that isn't there; like when a magician performs an illusion. But illusions require manipulating something that is there (like with mirrors or projectors) and making it look like something else. Hallucinations



are perceptions of something that doesn't exist in reality, and you aren't being manipulated to see it.

### **Why Do People Hallucinate?**

Given the definition above, we can all admit to having "hallucinations" of some sort. These are mostly our mind playing tricks on us; I'm hungry so I might start smelling food at lunchtime that hasn't arrived yet. Or, I might "hear" the gate open when I'm eagerly anticipating my pizza delivery. Hallucinations like this are pretty benign, and we expect this kind of stuff from day-to-day. Nobody thinks we're crazy if we tell them about it either. Most of these types of hallucinations last only for an instant.

Doctors get involved when the hallucinations become more chronic and are affecting our lives. Hearing voices regularly, seeing things frequently. This usually points to some sort of mental disorder like schizophrenia, Alzheimer's disease, or even a tumor in the brain. Damage to the brain due to trauma can also cause hallucinations.

It is also accurate to say that we may encounter some kind of hallucination as part of the grieving process. When someone passes, they may be constantly in our thoughts, and we start to see, smell or hear things that aren't there. It's important to note, however, that these kind of hallucinations are usually very brief. If Grandma passes, you may see what you think is her out of the corner of your eye. Or, maybe you wake up from a dream and think you saw her sitting in the chair next to your bed. And then she was gone. You don't usually have a meal and full-blown conversations with these kind of apparitions. If you have encounters that extend over a long period of time, you're falling into the needing medical treatment camp.

### **Were The Sighting Of Jesus After His Death Merely Hallucinations?**

After Jesus was put to death, his disciples certainly would have been downtrodden and possibly feeling misled. They had longed for the Messiah to come and rescue them. But, the guy who they thought was going to do that had just been arrested and publicly executed. They were probably pretty sad. Sounds like the right conditions for grief based hallucinations doesn't it?

The good news for us is there are [reliable eyewitness testimonies](#) of the appearances of Jesus after his death. In the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 28:9), the women who he appears to "took hold of his feet". Matthew records that the women physically touched him. Remember, [the testimony of women in 1st Century Jewish culture was less valuable in court](#)



[than a thief or criminal](#). If women touched the feet of the risen Jesus, the Gospel writers wouldn't have lied about it. If they were making it up, the Gospel authors wouldn't have mentioned it at all! Or they would have said one of the men touched his feet. As soon as they told someone else a woman had a supernatural encounter, that person would have thought the disciple was crazy. It would have hurt their case more than helped it.

Next, Jesus appeared to Cleopas and another disciple on the road to Emmaus. (Luke 24:13-35 and Mark 16:12-13) They had conversations about how Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of the Old Testament. *They* is the operative word here. Both of the disciples had the same encounter. At the same time. Is it possible each of them desired to see Jesus so they had visions of him? Yes, but not a shared vision at the same time. There isn't a single recorded instance of a shared hallucination in all of history. It would be like me waking up next to my wife and we both had the same dream. It doesn't happen. They couldn't have *both* had the same vision - and interacted with it - at the same time. Then, to literally solidify that this was a physical appearance, Jesus broke bread with the two disciples. Remember, people who have grief based hallucinations usually have them for a fleeting moment. They may think they see Grandma sitting in her rocking chair, she looks up at them and then vanishes. This interaction went from both men seeing the same thing, holding a conversation with it, to them traveling with it, to them sitting at a table and breaking bread with it.

After Jesus left them, these two men ran to tell "the eleven and those who were with them" what had just happened (Luke 24:33-35). As they are talking about these things, Jesus appears again. Everyone sees him. At the same time. At first, they were frightened because they thought he *was* a spirit. So, he showed them his wounds. And, because they were still afraid, he ate with them to show that he was real. Spirits don't eat fish. Jesus did when he appeared to his disciples.

Thomas, one of the Twelve Disciples, was not present at this group meeting. He didn't believe when they told him Jesus has visited them. So, Jesus returned to the disciples again and showed Thomas his wounds. It's unclear if Thomas actually touched the wounds or not, but he saw enough to be convinced in his doubting heart that what he saw was a risen Jesus who was in physical form.

Some days later, seven of the disciples were fishing. Jesus shows up, but they don't recognize him at first. They all see him. And, while they are out fishing, what does he do? He builds a fire and makes them breakfast. It would be one thing for you to see a figure on the shore while you were out to sea. But, for this "hallucination" to then cook you breakfast... Maybe they were just so hungry after a hard day's work they hallucinated someone building a fire and making them breakfast.



## The Problem With James and Paul

Two other people who Jesus appeared to were James, his half-brother, and Paul, still known as Saul of Tarsus at this point. Remember the transformative experiences both men had. Even though Jesus was his brother, James was a skeptic (John 7:5). He thought Jesus was crazy (Mark 3:21). But, Jesus appeared to him and he went from skeptic to one of the pillars of the church and it's leader in Jerusalem. Now, I lost my father a few years ago. I think about him a lot when I'm doing certain things. When this happens he's on my mind and I'm feeling some grief most likely. But, if my Dad suddenly appeared to me, and told me I needed to quit my job and become a professional bass fisherman (fishing was one of his favorite past times), it would take an awful lot to make me think that was really my Dad and I should do what he said. Most likely, I would just count it as me really wanting to see my dad.

Paul is a completely different story. With James, at least you had that familial relationship, and the possibility of grief. But, before he became the most prolific writer of the New Testament, Paul was in the business of hunting and persecuting Christians. In fact, he was on the road to Damascus to root out some more of them when Jesus appeared to him (Acts 9:1-9). Saul hated the Christians. Why would he be experiencing grief at the death of Jesus? Yet he had an encounter that altered his life more than anyone else in the early church history. Could a hallucination cause that? And how do you explain that his companions saw and heard something as well? Remember, hallucinations are personal, not a group thing.

## One Final Problem

OK, let's entertain the idea that all of these people hallucinated something, involving the same person, multiple times, and in groups. There is still one problem; where was the body? If the Jewish High council wanted to put a stop to this fledgling band of miscreants the first thing they would do is go get the body from the tomb and show everyone in the city that Jesus' followers were wrong. They were either crazy or lying. But, that didn't happen. In fact, there was a coverup to try to explain why the body was missing (Matthew 28:11-15). Had the Jewish leaders been able to produce a body, then the stories of a bodily resurrection would have been proven false from the very beginning. This would make the notion of grief based hallucinations at little more believable. But, the tomb was empty.

Hallucinations are tricks that your mind plays on you. It convinces you that something is there when it is not. Because they are generated by your mind, it is impossible for you to share a hallucination with someone else. Also, hallucinations do not cause people to change their lives so drastically. And, even if someone sees a hallucination of a dead person, we



## Were The Sightings Of Jesus Merely Hallucinations?

should still be able to produce a dead body to show that the hallucination wasn't a real person. But, if we study the events of the Resurrection, we will see that the people Jesus appeared to witnessed the same things at the same time, saw Jesus interact with the physical world (eating, cooking, etc), and were so convinced by what they saw that their lives were changed dramatically. They were so sure that what they experienced was a physically resurrected Jesus, they were willing to die for it. Based on these reactions, it isn't reasonable to believe that events Jesus' disciples experienced were merely hallucinations. It's more reasonable to believe that they encountered the risen Christ just as the Scriptures document.