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“Rebecca McLaughlin reveals that the story of Jesus is both believable and beautiful, especially for those searching for hope, for Easter is much more than a holiday filled with egg hunts and chocolate bunnies. If this Jesus of Nazareth really did live a sinless life, die a substitutionary death, and then come back to resurrection life, everything changes; because it means you can be fully known, yet fully loved, by the Creator God of the universe, who gives us more than holidays—for he gives us himself, forever.”

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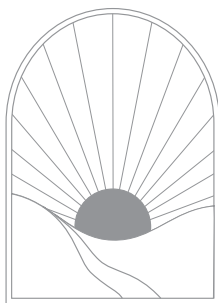


REBECCA McLAUGHLIN

**IS EASTER**

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**UNBELIEVABLE?**



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*For Katherine,  
with hope that God is making himself obvious*

# Introduction

“**M**ummy, what do mermaids eat?” This question came from my three-year-old, Luke. “Mermaids aren’t real,” I explained. He followed up: “Are elephants real?”

He’s subsequently wondered about snakes, cows, pigs, and monkeys—despite having seen some of these in the flesh! I guess it’s confusing when you’re three. I read him stories about both real and imaginary things, so how is he to know the difference? One solution would be for me to just read him works of fact. But so many of the best stories feature not-quite-real things: magic, mermaids, dragons, and implausibly happy endings. Perhaps that’s why, as I was idly scrolling Instagram the other day, this block quote hit me like a cobra’s strike:

*“Reading stories is a gentle way for a child to encounter the hardest truth that shadows mortal life: There are no happy endings.”<sup>1</sup>*

It was from an essay in the *New York Times* by author Margaret Renkl. My first, instinctive, gut reaction was to shout out, “That’s not true!”

It was a predictably human response. Religious or not, we’re primed to believe in happy endings. We want (as one agnostic friend of mine once said) “the universe to have a plan for us”—and a purpose beyond the plan of using our remains as fertilizer. But is it all just wishful thinking?

In car rides with my kids right now, we’re listening to Peter Pan. Famously, when the fairy Tinkerbell is dying, she tells Peter she thinks she could get well again if children believed in fairies. Peter appeals to children everywhere, “If you believe ... clap your hands; don’t let Tink die.”<sup>2</sup> However old we might be, part of us will want to clap when this appeal comes—if not for fairies, then for something magical to lift us out of the mundane and everlasting.

So, are these happy endings just a scam—a gentle lie we tell to kids until they’re old enough to know the truth? Or might there truly be a way for us to live (as fairy tales put it) “happily ever after”?

In this short book, I want to make a hope-filled case that the answer to that last question is “Yes.” I want to look at the outrageous claim that, almost two millennia ago, a man who had died an unbelievably horrible death came back to unbelievably wonderful life—and offers to include us in this life, if we will trust in him.



The resurrection of the 1st-century Jewish rabbi known as Jesus of Nazareth is something Christians celebrate each Sunday, but especially at Easter. If you're hazy on the details of the story, never fear: we'll do a recap on the life, death, and apparent resurrection of Jesus in chapter 1. But rather than just retelling the story in this book, I want to explore whether it might actually be true. To do this, we will ask hard questions about Easter. Not "Is there an Easter Bunny?" or "How many chocolate eggs can I legitimately eat?" But questions that snip through the frills that have accrued around the Easter holiday and that cut to its 1st-century heart.

To start with, Christians claim that Jesus was a real person who lived and died in history. So, in chapter 1, we'll ask, "Is Jesus' life historical?" Second, Christians believe that Jesus' death wasn't just an example of Roman brutality but that he'd planned to die as a substitute for sinners, to take the punishment we all deserve for turning against God. This raises moral questions about whether you and I *are* sinners, whether God is right to judge us, and whether one person being punished on behalf of others is any kind of justice. So, chapter 2 will ask, "Is Jesus' death ethical?" The logic of the cross and the hope of Christianity is tethered to the claim that Jesus physically rose from the dead, so in chapter 3, we'll ask the most Easter-ish question of all: "Is Jesus' resurrection credible?" Finally, in chapter 4,

we'll question whether Jesus' offer of eternal life with him is even desirable.

I don't know how you feel about Jesus today. I don't know whether Christianity sounds to you like clothes you've long outgrown, like an outfit in which you wouldn't be seen dead, like clothing from a culture not your own, or like something you used to wear and wish you could again. I don't know whether you've been hurt by Christians or seen Christians hurting others. I don't know if you're living your best life now or trudging through a trench of hopelessness. None of us come to questions about faith without feelings: good or bad, or just indifferent. But if we're honest, we all long for hope beyond the grave—some kind of happy ending for ourselves and those we love.

Whether you think that hope of everlasting life is pure naivety or you're wondering if there might just be a God who has a plan for your life, this book is for you. I'm not going to ask you to bury your brain and clap your hands to show that you believe in fairies. Instead, I want you to ask the awkward questions, to reckon with the hardest truth that shadows mortal life, to take a fresh look at the resurrection claim, and to wonder if it is just wishful thinking or whether it might—against all odds—be all our wildest dreams come true.

You see, if Jesus really *did* come back to life, it's not just a matter of magical curiosity, like "What do mermaids eat?" If Jesus did come back to life, it means

the Maker of all time and space has stepped into the universe for love of you. It means that you were worth his death and that he wants you in his life. It means you are more seen and known and loved than you could dare to hope and that the greatest offer ever made is sitting on the table, waiting for you to take it up. But before we look at Jesus' unbelievable offer, we need to ask, "Is Jesus' life even historical?"



## CHAPTER 1

# Is Jesus' Life Historical?

“**I**, Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus This-that-and-the-other (for I shall not trouble you yet with all my titles)...”

My favorite historical novel begins with these words. *I, Claudius*, by Robert Graves, is a fictionalized autobiography of a relatively little-known Roman emperor. The real Claudius was born in 10 BC and died in AD 54. He was politically sidelined for much of his life, because he was disabled. But when his nephew the emperor Caligula was killed, Claudius was the last remaining adult male in the family. So, at the age of 50, much to his surprise, Claudius became the most powerful man on earth. But unless you're something of a history nerd (or happen to have seen the 1970s TV series based on Graves's book), you may well not have heard of him.

When Claudius was a child, in an obscure part of the Roman Empire a low-income teenage girl gave birth to

a son and named him Jesus. Before Claudius became emperor, the man this boy became had died upon a Roman cross. Rather than being born into the imperial family, Jesus of Nazareth was born in obscurity. He lived roughly half as long as Claudius, and he died a shameful and excruciating death. Unlike Claudius (who was an accomplished historian), Jesus never wrote a book, raised an army, or ruled a realm. And yet he has become, by any measure, the most influential person who has ever lived.

In this chapter, we'll look at the historical evidence for the basic facts of Jesus' life, and we'll ask whether the four New Testament biographies—the Gospels known as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are giving us reliable testimony about this 1st-century rabbi, or whether they (like *I, Claudius*) are weaving fiction in with the facts. But first, we'll sketch the outline of Jesus' life as these Gospels tell it.

### **What's the Story?**

Once upon a time (in about 4 BC, to be precise), Jesus was born in Bethlehem: a small town in the southern Jewish region of Judea. The Jews were living as a subjugated racial and religious group within the Roman Empire. Jesus' mother, Mary, lived in the troubled north, in an insignificant village called Nazareth. Mary was the most common name among Jewish women of that time and place, and this Mary

was sufficiently poor that the newborn Jesus was laid in an animal feeding trough. But despite her unpromising credentials, Mary claimed she'd been made pregnant by the Holy Spirit of God himself.

This claim was wild.

Unlike their pagan overlords, the Jews believed in one Creator God. This God was utterly unlike the Greek and Roman deities, who sometimes impregnated human women and spawned demigods. But Mary claimed that an angel had appeared to her and said her son would be the Son of God. What's more, the angel had said that Jesus would be God's earth-shattering, long-promised King: the Messiah (from the Hebrew) or Christ (from the Greek). Talk about great expectations!

At first, it seemed that Jesus might just be this great Messiah of the Jews. He grew to be an incredible teacher and miracle worker. People said that his words alone could stop storms, heal the sick, and even raise the dead. He claimed that he was indeed God's Son and that he was the much-anticipated Christ. But unexpectedly for such a claimant to the throne, he said he'd come "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). In fact, as Jesus' ministry (public teaching) went on, he kept predicting not that he would *overthrow* the Romans but that he'd *die* at their hands. He said this was the plan: that he would die, so that anyone who trusts in him could live. But even his disciples didn't understand.

Then, one fateful Friday, after only a few short years of public teaching, Jesus was nailed to a Roman cross. All hope that he was God's great King was snuffed out. His disciples were devastated. His mother, Mary, and many of his other friends and followers watched Jesus die. But on the Sunday morning, another Mary from another little village named Magdala (aka Mary Magdalene) went to Jesus' tomb with some of his other female followers. These grieving women hoped to give Jesus' body the proper burial treatment. But when they came to the tomb, it was empty. Two angels showed up and explained to them that Jesus had been raised to life again. Mary Magdalene even met the risen Jesus in the flesh, and she and her companions went back to tell the other disciples what they'd seen and heard.

At first, the male disciples didn't believe the women's story. But then Jesus revealed himself to them as well. He told them that his plan had worked. Instead of defeating the Romans, he'd beaten sin and death, so anyone who put their trust in him could be forgiven by God and welcomed into everlasting life. "Thus it is written," Jesus explained, "that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47).

That is the Easter story in a nutshell: the God of all the universe was born into poverty to die for you and



me—then raised to life so we can be forgiven and live eternally beyond the grave. But is it pure naivety to think it might be true? After all, some people question whether Jesus even lived.

### **Did Jesus Even Live?**

If you think there's some historical doubt as to whether Jesus of Nazareth ever really walked this earth, you're not alone. One 2015 survey found that 40% of adults in the UK either didn't think that Jesus was a real, historical person or weren't sure.<sup>3</sup> But the evidence for Jesus' life is unmistakable. As the famously skeptical New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman puts it, "The reality is that whatever else you may think about Jesus, he certainly did exist." This view is no minority report. As Ehrman explains, it's "held by virtually every expert on the planet."<sup>4</sup>

You see, even if we set the Gospels aside, the basic facts of Jesus' life are attested by other early documents, written by people who didn't even like Christians. From these non-biblical documents, we know that Jesus was a 1st-century Jewish rabbi who was believed to be the Christ, crucified under the authority of the Roman governor Pilate (who ruled over Judea from AD 26/27 to 36/37), and subsequently worshiped by his followers as if he were divine.<sup>5</sup>

So, we know that Jesus lived. But the Gospels were written decades after Jesus' death. Can we really take their accounts of his life seriously?