
Is Matthew the Touchstone?

*A Seven-Session Bible Study on the Resurrection Narratives of
Matthew's Gospel*

Based on the doctoral research of

Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, Ph.D.

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Introduction

Did Matthew intend his account of the resurrection to be taken as literal, physical history -- or as extended theological metaphor? That question, once confined to academic seminaries, has moved into popular culture and even into the pews. This seven-session Bible study follows the answer Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray built across his doctoral dissertation at Amridge University's Turner School of Theology (2016).

Dr. Gray's method is inductive and text-centered. Rather than beginning with a conclusion and searching for proof, he reads Matthew from chapter 1 to chapter 28, cataloguing every passage that touches on death, the soul, the afterlife, judgment, and resurrection. He tracks the Greek verb *egeiro* -- Matthew's word for raising the dead -- across every occurrence in the Gospel. He surveys the Jewish and Greco-Roman background that shaped what first-century readers heard when they encountered resurrection language. And he engages, directly and fairly, the strongest scholarly arguments for a metaphorical reading.

His conclusion is clear and carefully earned: *Matthew intended to report a literal, physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead*. The metaphorical interpretation finds no support in Matthew's actual language or literary practice. These sessions follow that argument from beginning to end -- honoring the rigor of Dr. Gray's scholarship and the faith of the communities his work was written to serve.

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The Question That Won't Go Away

Introducing the Debate, the Scholar, and Why It Matters

Most Christians have never heard the argument that Matthew's resurrection narrative was never intended to be read as literal history. Yet serious scholars -- people with doctorates who have spent careers studying the New Testament -- make exactly this claim. They argue that Matthew was not making a historical report when he described Jesus rising from the dead. He was crafting extended theological metaphor: a parable of cosmic significance, designed to convey spiritual truth without claiming that any specific event occurred. Dr. Phillip Gray's doctoral research was written to answer this argument directly -- using Matthew's own text.

Who Is Dr. Phillip Gray?

Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray earned his Ph.D. from Amridge University's Turner School of Theology in 2016. His dissertation -- *Is Matthew the Touchstone?* -- is a careful, rigorous, and deeply faithful piece of scholarship. He is not a detached academic writing for other academics; he is a Christian who takes the resurrection seriously as an event that actually happened, and who wanted to demonstrate, using the best tools of biblical scholarship, that Matthew's Gospel presents it that way too.

What makes Dr. Gray's work remarkable is his method. Rather than arguing from the resurrection chapters alone, he worked through the entire Gospel from chapter 1 to chapter 28, cataloguing every passage that touches on life after death, resurrection, the soul, heaven, hell, and the nature of the body. His governing principle: *Matthew is his own best interpreter*. If you want to know what Matthew meant when he described the resurrection of Jesus in chapter 28, you need to know how he uses resurrection language throughout the other 27 chapters. Dr. Gray's conclusion: Matthew intended to report a literal, physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

The Metaphorical Resurrection Hypothesis

To understand why Dr. Gray's argument matters, we must understand the position he was responding to. The *metaphorical resurrection hypothesis* is not simply the claim that the resurrection did not happen. It is the subtler claim that the Gospel writers -- including Matthew -- never intended their resurrection stories to be read as historical claims in the first place. They were writing theological fiction: not to deceive anyone, but because everyone in their audience understood that this kind of religious storytelling was not meant to describe a literal event.

Three distinct positions have emerged in modern scholarship:

Three Scholarly Positions on the Resurrection Narratives

Position 1 -- The Visionary Hypothesis: The disciples had genuine, sincere visions of Jesus after his death -- real experiences, but psychological or spiritual in nature, not physical encounters with a risen body. Over time, as the story was told and retold, it gradually took on more physical, concrete detail. By the time Matthew wrote, the tradition described what looks like a bodily resurrection -- even though the original experience was visionary.

Position 2 -- The Metaphorical Hypothesis: The Gospel writers were sophisticated authors who knew exactly what they were doing. They were deliberately writing theological metaphors. The resurrection story was never intended to describe a literal event. It is a parable about the ongoing power of Jesus' teaching and presence -- a story that conveys deep religious truth without making a historical claim.

Position 3 -- The Literal View: The Gospel writers intended to describe real, historical events. Matthew meant what he said: an empty tomb, a risen body, genuine physical encounters. This is the traditional reading -- and the one Dr. Gray's research confirms.

Three Scholarly Positions on the Resurrection Narratives

The Visionary Hypothesis	The Metaphorical Hypothesis	The Literal View
The disciples experienced real but non-physical visions of Jesus. Over time, the stories became more physical and concrete. Matthew intended to describe something literal — but the tradition had already drifted from the original experience.	Matthew was a sophisticated author writing deliberate theological fiction — a 'megaparable.' The resurrection story is not a historical claim. It conveys spiritual truth through the vehicle of story. (The primary target of Dr. Gray's research.)	Matthew intended to describe a real, historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus. His language is drawn from first-century Jewish expectations of bodily resurrection, and his narrative reads as historical biography. (Dr. Gray's conclusion.)

Based on the scholarship of Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, Ph.D.

Figure: Three Scholarly Positions on the Resurrection Narratives

Dr. Gray's dissertation is written primarily to challenge Position 2 -- the metaphorical hypothesis. His argument is deliberately limited and therefore more powerful for it: he is not trying to prove the resurrection occurred. He is trying to show that Matthew, the author of the Gospel, was writing about a real, physical event -- not a parable. Whether that event actually

occurred is a separate question. But if Dr. Gray is right, then anyone who reads Matthew as metaphor has misread the text. They have gotten the basic genre of the document wrong.

The Touchstone: Matthew 27:51b-53

The specific passage that prompted Dr. Gray's research is one of the strangest and most debated in the entire New Testament:

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. — Matthew 27:51-53

No other Gospel records anything like it. No non-Christian historical source from the period mentions it. Scholar Robert J. Miller argued that this passage is obviously not meant to be read as literal history -- it reads like symbolic apocalyptic imagery. Dead people walking out of tombs and appearing in Jerusalem signals, in vivid poetic terms, that the death of Jesus split creation open.

Miller's critical move: this passage appears immediately before the resurrection narrative in chapter 28. If Matthew was writing symbolically in verses 51-53, why would he suddenly shift to straightforward historical reporting just a few verses later? Miller argues he would not. The rising saints passage becomes a 'touchstone' -- a key that unlocks the meaning of everything that follows. If the saints rose metaphorically, then so did Jesus.

Dr. Gray's response is elegant: rather than fighting over this one passage, he examines how Matthew uses resurrection language throughout his entire Gospel. The Greek verb *egeiro* -- to raise -- will prove to mean the same thing, consistently, across all 28 chapters. Matthew's own vocabulary becomes the answer to Miller's challenge.

Six Scholars Across the Spectrum

Before presenting his own argument, Dr. Gray surveys six scholars who represent different positions on the resurrection -- from the most skeptical to the most traditional. This is good scholarship: you cannot answer a challenge you have never actually heard.

The Six Scholars at a Glance

Gerd Ludemann -- Most Skeptical: Now an atheist, Ludemann argues the disciples had purely psychological visions. The resurrection never happened in any physical sense.

John Dominic Crossan -- The Megaparable View: A prominent Jesus Seminar scholar, Crossan argues the Gospels are 'book-length megaparables' -- deliberate theological fiction. Famous for saying: 'Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens.'

Robert J. Miller -- The Touchstone Argument: Miller's work directly prompted Dr. Gray's research. Miller argues Matthew 27:51b-53 proves the resurrection narrative was never meant literally.

Marcus Borg -- 'What the Camera Cannot Capture': Another Jesus Seminar scholar, Borg argues that whether the resurrection could have been captured on video is beside the point. The factual question is irrelevant to religious meaning.

Dale C. Allison Jr. -- Honest Uncertainty: A more moderate scholar who occupies a genuinely uncertain middle ground. Allison believes the Gospel writers did intend to describe a physical resurrection, but remains agnostic about whether it actually happened.

N. T. Wright -- The Traditional View: Wright's massive 817-page study is the most thorough modern defense of the traditional position. Dr. Gray's conclusions align most closely with Wright's: Matthew intended to narrate a literal, corporeal resurrection.

Six Scholars Across the Spectrum

Gerd Lüdemann

No resurrection in any meaningful sense — purely psychological visions

John Dominic Crossan

The Gospels are deliberate metaphorical fiction — 'megaparables'

Robert J. Miller

Matt 27:51b-53 is the 'touchstone' proving the resurrection is metaphorical

Marcus Borg

Whether it could be filmed is irrelevant — what matters is spiritual meaning

Dale C. Allison

Matthew intended a literal resurrection — but historical accuracy is uncertain

N. T. Wright

Jewish background proves resurrection meant bodily — the event is historical

Based on the scholarship of Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, Ph.D.

Figure: Six Scholars Across the Spectrum

This is not a simple liberal-versus-conservative debate. Some of these scholars retain something they call Christian faith -- but on the central historical question of what Matthew intended to describe, their answers diverge sharply from the traditional view. Dr. Gray's thesis aligns most closely with N. T. Wright: Matthew intended to narrate a literal, corporeal resurrection, using language his first-century Jewish audience would have understood in precisely those terms.

Why Matthew in Particular?

Matthew's Gospel is the testing ground for this debate for two reasons. First, the rising saints passage (27:51b-53) is unique to Matthew -- if you want to answer Miller's challenge, you have to go to Matthew. Second, Matthew's Gospel is particularly rich in its treatment of resurrection and the afterlife: the debate with the Sadducees, multiple explicit passion predictions, extensive teaching on the soul, hell, eternal life, and the final judgment. All of this material, spread across 28 chapters, gives Dr. Gray an enormous body of evidence to work with.

Dr. Gray closes his survey of the debate with an observation that frames the entire series:

Were it not for the miraculous elements in some of the events related therein, theories positing interpretations of Matthew as metaphor, midrash, myth or megaparable would never have arisen. — Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, Ph.D.

The reason some scholars read the resurrection as metaphor is not that the literary evidence demands it. It is that they have already decided, on philosophical grounds, that miracles do not happen. Dr. Gray's study is an invitation to do something different: to let Matthew speak for himself.

Dead Certain

What Ancient People Believed About the Afterlife

Words do not carry meaning in a vacuum. When Matthew described Jesus as 'risen' -- using the Greek word *egerthe* -- his first readers heard that word through the lens of their own beliefs about death and what follows it. To understand what Matthew meant, we have to understand what resurrection language meant to first-century Jews. That is what this session establishes.

Israel's Neighbors: Egypt and Babylon

Ancient Israel did not develop its beliefs in isolation. Egypt was arguably more preoccupied with the afterlife than any other ancient culture -- their entire religious life revolved around preparing for the next world. They believed some aspect of the human person survived the grave, which is why they mummified bodies: to preserve them for that continuing existence.

Babylon told a very different story. The Babylonians believed the dead continued in a dark, hopeless place called Aralu -- the 'Great Below.' The dead existed there as vague, shadowy presences with no hope of resurrection or reward. This bleak picture anticipates what the Hebrew scriptures call Sheol. But here is the critical observation: neither Egypt nor Babylon held anything like the Jewish hope of bodily resurrection. The bodily resurrection was not a cultural import from Israel's neighbors. It grew from Israel's own encounter with its God.

The Old Testament: Hints, Building Blocks, and Growing Clarity

Old Testament belief about the afterlife developed over time. The earlier books say relatively little about what happens after death. By the later prophets, especially Daniel, the language is strikingly clear.

Early Foundations

Deuteronomy 32:39 and 1 Samuel 2:6 both establish the same foundational claim: God alone is Lord over life and death.

It is I who put to death and give life. — Deuteronomy 32:39

The Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. — 1 Samuel 2:6

These texts do not spell out a doctrine of resurrection, but they establish the foundation: God is not limited by death. If he chose to raise the dead, nothing would prevent him.

Increasing Clarity: Isaiah and Daniel

Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy. — Isaiah 26:19

Notice the physical specificity: corpses rise. People lying in dust awake. This is not a metaphor for national renewal or spiritual experience. It is the language of bodies coming back to life.

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. — Daniel 12:2-3

Daniel treats the resurrection not as a startling new idea but as a shared hope -- he does not argue for it at length. He invokes it as something his readers already understood. Resurrection was already part of Israel's vocabulary.

One more passage deserves mention: Ezekiel 37, the Valley of Dry Bones. In its original context, this vision was a metaphor for national restoration after exile. But you cannot use resurrection as a metaphor unless your audience can imagine what resurrection would actually look like. By using this imagery, Ezekiel pushed the idea of literal resurrection further into Israel's conceptual vocabulary. Some scholars believe Ezekiel 37 may also have been one of Matthew's sources for the mysterious passage about the rising saints in Matthew 27 -- which we examine in Session 5.

The Old Testament: From Hints to Clarity

Deut 32:39 / 1 Sam 2:6	God is Lord over life and death — the foundational premise.
Job 19:25-27	A hope of seeing God 'in my flesh' — vague but personal.
Isaiah 26:19	'Your dead will live; their corpses will rise.' — physical, specific.
Daniel 12:2-3	'Many who sleep in the dust shall awake — some to everlasting life, some to contempt.' — the clearest OT statement.

Based on the scholarship of Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, Ph.D.

Figure: Old Testament Resurrection Progression

Three Jewish Groups, Three Different Answers

By the first century -- Matthew's world -- Jewish belief about the afterlife had crystallized around three main positions. Understanding these groups is essential for reading Matthew's Gospel, because Matthew's Jesus engages directly with one of them.

The Pharisees: Bodily Resurrection

The Pharisees held firmly to the resurrection of the body. The Jewish historian Josephus describes their belief as a two-stage view: at death, the soul survives in a waiting state; at the end of history, body and soul are reunited in a physical resurrection. The righteous are raised to eternal life; the wicked to judgment. By the end of the first century, belief in resurrection had become a formal requirement for participation in 'the age to come' in Pharisaic Judaism.

The Sadducees: No Resurrection

The Sadducees were the priestly aristocracy. They rejected resurrection entirely, accepting only the five books of Moses as authoritative Scripture and finding no clear teaching of resurrection there. They also rejected belief in angels and spirits. This is the group that challenges Jesus in Matthew 22 -- examined in detail in Session 4.

Hellenistic Jews: Immortality of the Soul

Jews most deeply influenced by Greek philosophy tended toward a different option: immortality of the soul rather than bodily resurrection. For Philo of Alexandria, shaped by Platonic thought, the soul was the real self and the body its prison. True immortality meant the soul's escape from bodily existence. This is almost the exact opposite of the Pharisaic view: in Pharisaism, the body is not the problem -- it is part of who you are, and you need it back.

Three First-Century Jewish Positions

PHARISEES	SADDUCEES	HELLENISTIC JEWS (Platonic influence)
Bodily resurrection — the dominant view. Soul survives in an intermediate state; body and soul reunited at the end of history. This was Matthew's world.	No resurrection at all. Accepted only the five books of Moses. Rejected angels and spirits. Challenged Jesus directly in Matthew 22.	Immortality of the soul — not resurrection. The body is a prison; death is liberation. The opposite of the Pharisaic hope.

Jesus aligns with the Pharisees — against the Sadducees — in Matthew 22.

Based on the scholarship of Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, Ph.D.

The Septuagint -- The Bible Matthew's Audience Read

Most first-century Jews -- including Matthew and his audience -- did not read the Hebrew Bible in Hebrew. They read it in the Greek Septuagint (LXX). This matters because the Septuagint makes the resurrection language of the Old Testament even clearer than the Hebrew original. N. T. Wright observes that in Isaiah 26:19, the Greek Septuagint uses *anistemi* -- the standard New Testament word for resurrection. In Daniel 12, the Greek rendering uses *egeiro* and *exegeiro* -- the very vocabulary that would later dominate New Testament resurrection language, including Matthew's Gospel.

When Matthew's readers heard *egeiro* -- 'to raise' -- in the resurrection narratives of chapter 28, they were hearing a word they already knew from the Scriptures they grew up reading. The Old Testament they knew, in Greek, pointed toward bodily resurrection.

The Greeks and Romans: A Striking Contrast

For Plato, the soul was the real self -- rational, immaterial, and immortal. The body was a lower, material prison from which the soul longed to be freed. True happiness came when the soul escaped bodily existence. Bodily resurrection was not desirable in this framework -- it was the opposite of what you would hope for. The Stoics arrived at a similar conclusion through different reasoning; the Epicureans went further still: when you die, you simply cease to exist.

N. T. Wright's conclusion after surveying the entire ancient Greco-Roman world is decisive: 'From Homer onwards, the language of resurrection was not used to denote life after death in general. Resurrection was not a subset of the general belief in life after death. It was a specific idea, and the ancient Greeks and Romans, by and large, did not believe it.'

When Paul stood in Athens and proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus, the crowd mocked him -- and they mocked him because they knew exactly what he was claiming and found it philosophically offensive. The metaphorical reading of Matthew would have made him far less controversial, not more. It was precisely because his claim was literal and bodily that it was so startling.

What Dr. Gray's Background Research Establishes

1. The Old Testament teaches bodily resurrection -- not as a Greek import, but as an organic development from Israel's monotheism.
2. By the first century, bodily resurrection -- specifically the Pharisaic view -- had become the dominant position in Palestinian Judaism. This was Matthew's world.
3. The contrast with Greco-Roman belief is sharp. The Christian claim was not a recycled pagan idea; it was a distinctively Jewish idea that Greeks found offensive.
4. The Septuagint used resurrection vocabulary (*egeiro*, *anistemi*) in key Old Testament texts, establishing that language for Greek-speaking Jews.

Reading Between the Lines

What Matthew Believed About the Afterlife Before Chapter 28

Suppose you wanted to know what a word meant in an unfamiliar book. The best approach is to look at how the author uses it elsewhere in the same work. That is exactly Dr. Gray's method. He does not begin with Matthew 28 and try to figure out what 'risen' means in isolation. Instead, he reads through all 28 chapters, cataloguing every passage that touches on death, the soul, the afterlife, judgment, and resurrection -- building a complete picture of Matthew's vocabulary and assumptions before he ever arrives at the resurrection story.

By the end of that survey, an unmistakable pattern emerges: Matthew's understanding of the afterlife is bodily, physical, and consistent from the first chapter to the last. The resurrection of chapter 28 is not a sudden leap into unfamiliar territory; it is the culmination of a framework Matthew has been building all along.

Matthew's View of Hell: Bodies and Souls at Stake

One of the most striking passages in Dr. Gray's survey is Matthew 10:28 -- perhaps the most theologically significant verse in the entire Gospel for understanding Matthew's view of the afterlife:

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. — Matthew 10:28

Two key points emerge. First, the body and soul are distinct -- one can be killed while the other survives, a dualistic anthropology. Second, and more striking: hell involves the destruction of *both* body and soul. This implies that even the wicked will be resurrected -- body and soul reunited -- to face final judgment. You cannot destroy a body that has not been raised. Matthew, in this one brief verse, implies a general resurrection of all humanity -- not just the righteous.

Matthew uses the word *Gehenna* -- Jesus' word for hell -- more than any other Gospel, and always with striking physical specificity. In Matthew 5:29-30, Jesus warns that it is better to lose a limb than for 'your whole body to be thrown into hell.' In Matthew 13:40-42, the condemned are thrown into a 'fiery furnace' where there will be 'weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Weeping. Gnashing of teeth. Fire. These are bodily experiences -- the language of sensory suffering. If hell involves physical bodies suffering physical punishment, then the wicked must have been raised in a physical resurrection. And if the wicked are raised bodily, the righteous certainly are.

Eternal Life and the Kingdom of Heaven

The righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. — Matthew 13:43

Dr. Gray notes that this echoes Daniel 12:3 and suggests not a ghostly half-life but a brilliant, energized, transformed existence -- a whole, glorified, radiant person existing in the full light of God's kingdom.

Jesus' paradox in Matthew 16:25 -- 'whoever loses his life for my sake will find it' -- only makes sense within a framework that affirms personal survival of physical death. The self continues beyond physical death. This is not simply a metaphor for personal growth; it presupposes a real resurrection of the person who dies.

The parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46) presupposes that the dead have been raised -- you cannot be judged if you do not exist -- and that judgment applies to all humanity, not merely those alive at the moment of Christ's return. Every person who ever lived faces this reckoning. This requires a general resurrection.

Body and Soul: Matthew's Dualistic Anthropology

Matthew's description of Jesus' death is brief and precise: 'He gave up his spirit' (27:50). This reflects a specific understanding of what death is: the departure of the spirit from the body. Body plus spirit equals life; when the spirit departs, physical death occurs.

When the disciples see Jesus walking on water, Matthew tells us: 'They thought it was a ghost and cried out in fear' (14:26). Matthew's audience had a clear concept of what a ghost was -- a non-material entity without physical substance. They knew the difference between a real person and a ghost. Jesus corrects them: 'It is I; do not be afraid.' This distinction will matter enormously in Session 6 when we read the resurrection appearances. Dr. Gray argues that Matthew is at pains to show the risen Jesus is not a ghost. The disciples already know what ghosts look like -- they thought they were seeing one on the water.

Several passages in Matthew also assume an 'intermediate state' -- a period between an individual's death and the final resurrection during which souls continue to exist. Jesus' argument in Matthew 22:32 from Exodus 3:6 is particularly striking: God says 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob' in the present tense, centuries after the patriarchs died. They must in some sense still be alive -- 'He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.' The two-stage pattern emerges: at death, the soul enters an intermediate state; at the end of history, body and soul are reunited in the final resurrection.

Miracle Raisings During Jesus' Ministry

Before the explicit resurrection predictions, Matthew records several accounts where people are raised from the dead during Jesus' ministry. These establish a critical lexical pattern.

The synagogue ruler's daughter (Matthew 9:18-26): a local leader comes to Jesus with news that his daughter has just died. The mourners and flute players are already there -- a death scene without ambiguity. Jesus goes to the girl and raises her: Matthew uses the Greek word *egeiro*. She gets up. This is the same word Matthew will use when he describes Jesus'

resurrection in chapter 28. In Matthew 10:8, Jesus commissions his disciples to 'raise the dead' (*nekrous egeirete*) -- the same verb, the same physical meaning. In Matthew 11:5, responding to John the Baptist's disciples, Jesus lists concrete physical miracles: the blind see, the lame walk, 'and the dead are raised' (*nekroi egeirontai*). Even Herod, hearing of Jesus' works, concludes that Jesus must be John the Baptist 'raised from the dead' (*egerthe apo ton nekron*, 14:2). Even in the mind of a suspicious king, 'raised from the dead' meant a body returning to physical life.

Dr. Gray's point is cumulative: by the time we reach chapter 28, *egeiro* has appeared many times in Matthew's Gospel, always with the same literal meaning. Matthew has established its meaning through consistent use. When we read 'He has risen' (*egerthe*) in chapter 28, there is no reason -- and no textual warrant -- to suddenly read the same word in a figurative or metaphorical sense.

The Resurrection Predictions: Third Day, Bodily, Specific

As Jesus moves toward Jerusalem, he gives the Pharisees one sign only -- the sign of Jonah:

Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. — Matthew 12:39-40

The comparison is telling. Jonah went into the fish physically, genuinely, bodily, and came out the same way. The sign is the rescue of a person from his place of entombment. Notice also the time-stamp: three days and three nights. This is a historical, time-bound event. Metaphors do not have time-stamps.

Three times in close succession, Jesus tells his disciples plainly what is coming (Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19). Each prediction uses *egeiro* -- the verb Matthew has established throughout the Gospel to mean the physical raising of a dead body. Each prediction includes 'on the third day' -- another historical time-stamp. These are specific, verifiable, physical predictions.

One of the most revealing passages in the entire Gospel is Matthew 27:62-66: the chief priests and Pharisees go to Pilate and ask for a guard at Jesus' tomb. Their reason -- they were afraid the disciples would steal his body and announce a fake resurrection. Jesus' opponents -- his enemies -- interpreted his resurrection predictions in physically literal terms. They were not worried about a vision or a spiritual experience; they were worried about a missing body. The guard story only makes sense if everyone involved understood the claim to be physical.

Matthew's Implicit Framework -- Before Chapter 28

Matthew teaches a dualistic anthropology: human beings consist of body and soul, separable at death.

The soul survives death in an intermediate state (Hades) and awaits final resurrection.

There will be a general resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked -- bodily, physical, sensory.

The Greek verb *egeiro* has been used consistently throughout the Gospel to mean the physical raising of a dead body. There is no figurative use of this word anywhere in Matthew.

Jesus' resurrection predictions are physically specific: third day, named people, identifiable locations.

Even Jesus' enemies understood the resurrection claim as bodily and took steps to prevent it.

The Language of Resurrection

The Sadducee Debate, the Passion Predictions, and a Word That Changes Everything

We have now traced *egeiro* through many passages in Matthew. Today we come to the passage that is the centerpiece of Dr. Gray's Chapter 3: the Sadducee debate in Matthew 22 -- the only place in Matthew's Gospel where resurrection and the afterlife are the direct subject of a formal debate. Jesus' answer here is crucial for understanding both the content of his teaching on resurrection and the physical framework Matthew has been establishing throughout.

The Sadducee Debate: Matthew 22:23-33

The Sadducees were the priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem. They rejected resurrection entirely and were always looking for ways to make the Pharisees -- and now Jesus -- look foolish. Their trap is clever: they invoke the Mosaic law of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5), then spin out a scenario in which seven brothers each marry the same woman in succession, all dying childless. In the resurrection, they ask with barely concealed mockery -- whose wife will she be? Since she cannot be married to all seven simultaneously without violating the law against polygamy, the Sadducees believe they have exposed the resurrection doctrine as self-contradictory.

Part One of Jesus' Answer: You've Got It Wrong

You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. — Matthew 22:29-30

The Sadducees' error was assuming that resurrection life would simply be a continuation of present life in the same form. They imported the social structures of this world -- marriage, family inheritance, legal obligations -- into their picture of the next world, then pointed out the contradictions. Jesus cuts this off at the root: the resurrection is not the resumption of ordinary biological existence. It is entry into a qualitatively new mode of being.

When Jesus says the resurrected will be 'like the angels in heaven,' he is not saying people become angels. He is saying the resurrection state will be like the angels' state in specific ways: angels do not marry, they do not reproduce, they do not need the biological continuity that marriage exists to provide. The resurrection body will have moved beyond the necessities that drive earthly life -- but it will still be fully personal, real, and continuous with who you are. This is a transformed existence, not a lesser one.

Part Two of Jesus' Answer: Scripture Does Teach This

Having corrected the Sadducees' premise, Jesus goes on the offensive. He quotes Exodus 3:6 -- from the five books of Moses that the Sadducees accepted as authoritative: 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' God says *I am* -- present tense -- not *I was*. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died centuries before Moses was born. If God still identifies himself as their God in the present tense, then they must in some sense still be alive -- and if they exist now, they will be raised at the resurrection.

He is not the God of the dead but of the living. — Matthew 22:32

The crowd's reaction says it all: 'When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.' And in an interesting detail, the Pharisees -- who agreed with Jesus on resurrection -- were impressed. Jesus had just made their case for them, from their opponents' own Scriptures.

Matthew 22 -- Four Key Conclusions

1. Matthew's Jesus explicitly affirms a future bodily resurrection. This is not implicit or inferred; it is direct teaching.
2. Jesus aligns himself with the Pharisees against the Sadducees. The Pharisaic view -- bodily resurrection -- is the correct one.
3. The resurrection state will be transformed and different from this life -- 'like the angels' -- but it is still a real, personal, future existence.
4. The intermediate state is real: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are currently alive in some form, awaiting the final resurrection.

The Sign of Jonah: A Time-Stamped Prediction

A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. — Matthew 12:39-40

The comparison is to Jonah -- a man who physically entered the fish, was physically trapped in darkness, and was physically released. The 'sign of Jonah' is specifically the rescue of the person from his entombment -- a physical deliverance. And then there is the time-stamp: three days and three nights. This is specific. Historical. Verifiable. You do not put a time-stamp on a metaphor.

The Three Passion Predictions

He must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, be killed, and on the third day be raised. — Matthew 16:21

The same prediction is repeated at Matthew 17:22-23 and again at Matthew 20:17-19. Each uses *egeiro* -- the verb Matthew has used throughout the Gospel for the physical raising of dead bodies. Each specifies 'the third day.' Each names specific historical actors. The prediction could, in principle, be verified or falsified. Notably, the disciples do not understand -- Matthew 17:23 tells us 'they were filled with grief.' If the predictions were obviously metaphorical, they would not have needed explanation. The confusion of the disciples is itself evidence that the prediction was about something literal.

One more detail: just before the passion, a woman anoints Jesus with expensive perfume. Jesus defends her: 'She poured this perfume on my body to prepare me for burial' (Matthew 26:12). Jesus says 'my body' and 'me' interchangeably. His personal identity is closely tied to his physical body -- which makes the resurrection of that body the resurrection of *him*.

Dr. Gray's Lexical Conclusion

Dr. Gray's Lexical Finding

The Greek verb *egeirō* — 'to raise'

appears in Matthew 9, 10, 11, 14, 16, 17, 20, 26, 27, and 28

In every single instance, without exception,
it describes a physical body physically returning to life.

There is no passage in Matthew where *egeirō* is used figuratively.
None.

When the angel says 'He has risen' (ēgerthē) in chapter 28, the word means exactly what it has meant in every other chapter.

Based on the scholarship of Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, Ph.D.

Figure: Dr. Gray's Lexical Finding -- egeiro in Matthew

Dr. Gray's Lexical Finding

The Greek verb *egeiro* -- 'to raise' -- appears consistently throughout Matthew's Gospel in contexts where a physical body returns to physical life.

Used for the synagogue ruler's daughter (9:25) -- a physically dead body raised.

Used in the commission to raise the dead (10:8) -- physical healings.

Used in the list of messianic signs (11:5) -- concrete, physical miracles.

Used when Herod speculates about John the Baptist (14:2) -- physical bodily return.

Used in all three passion predictions (16:21; 17:23; 20:19) -- physical rising on the third day.

Used for the sleeping saints in 27:52 -- bodies coming out of tombs.

Used in the angel's proclamation at the empty tomb (28:6) -- 'He has risen.'

In every single instance, the word describes a physical body physically returning to life.

There is no passage in Matthew where *egeiro* is used figuratively or metaphorically. None.

This lexical finding is the linchpin of Dr. Gray's entire dissertation. The scholars who argue that Matthew intended a metaphorical resurrection must explain why *egeiro* suddenly means something different in chapter 28 than it has meant in every other chapter. They have not offered that explanation, because there is no literary evidence for it. Matthew, as Dr. Gray puts it, is his own best lexicographer.

The Touchstone

The Rising Saints of Matthew 27 -- History or Metaphor?

This session is the pivot of the entire series. Everything studied in Sessions 2 through 4 -- the Jewish background, Matthew's implicit teachings, the lexical pattern of *egeiro* -- has been building toward this moment. We now examine the passage that prompted Dr. Gray to write his dissertation.

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. — Matthew 27:51b-53

No other Gospel records anything like it. No non-Christian historical source from the period mentions it. Many scholars -- including some who fully believe in the resurrection of Jesus -- find it very difficult to accept as a description of something that literally happened. Dr. Gray opens his analysis by acknowledging this difficulty plainly: the question is not primarily *did this happen?* His question is: *what did Matthew intend when he wrote it?* Those are different questions with different answers.

Miller's Touchstone Argument

Miller's Touchstone Argument -- Three Steps

Step 1: Matthew 27:51b-53 is clearly not meant to be read as literal history. It reads like symbolic, apocalyptic embellishment -- the kind of dramatic imagery Jewish writers sometimes used to signal that a cosmically significant event had occurred. Almost no scholar, even those who believe in the resurrection, defends this passage as a description of something that literally happened.

Step 2: This passage appears immediately before the resurrection narrative in chapter 28. If Matthew was writing symbolically in 27:51b-53, why would he suddenly shift to literal, straightforward historical reporting just a few verses later? It is not credible that a single author would mix literary modes so abruptly and without any signal to the reader.

Step 3 (Conclusion): The rising saints passage is a 'touchstone' -- an interpretive key that reveals Matthew's overall literary approach. If 27:51b-53 is metaphorical, so is the resurrection narrative that immediately follows. The two passages stand or fall together.

Miller's Touchstone Argument

1

27:51b-53 is clearly not literal history — it reads like symbolic, apocalyptic embellishment.

2

It stands immediately before the resurrection narrative in chapter 28.

3

If Matthew was writing symbolically there, why would he shift to literal history two verses later?

4

Therefore: 27:51b-53 is a 'touchstone' — it reveals Matthew's literary mode. The resurrection is metaphorical too.

Based on the scholarship of Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, Ph.D.

Figure: Miller's Touchstone Argument

Dr. Gray's Response: Four Arguments

Argument 1: The Literary Context Is Uniformly Historical

Matthew 27 is a passion narrative -- a detailed, sequential, historically anchored account of real events: the trial before Pilate, the crowd's demand for Barabbas, the crucifixion, the soldiers casting lots for Jesus' clothes, the darkness over the land from noon to three o'clock, the cry of desolation from the cross, the death. The rising saints account appears in the middle of this material without any literary break, transition marker, or change of tone. Compare this to how Matthew introduces his parables: 'He spoke many things to them in parables, saying...' When Matthew switches to parabolic or symbolic material, he tells you. No such convention appears in 27:51b-53.

Argument 2: The Vocabulary Is Identical

The verb used for the saints being raised -- *egerthesan* -- is the aorist passive of *egeiro*. It is the exact same verb Matthew has used throughout his Gospel for the physical raising of dead bodies. If *egeiro* means physical raising everywhere else in Matthew -- and it does, without a single exception -- there is no grammatical or lexical basis for reading it differently in 27:52. Furthermore, Matthew uses the word *somata* -- 'bodies' -- explicitly: 'the bodies (*somata*) of many holy people who had fallen asleep were raised.' This is not abstract language. It is the language of corpses.

Argument 3: Physical Details Point to Historical Narrative

Matthew fills this passage with concrete, physical details: the earthquake, the split rocks, the opened tombs, the holy city, the appearances to many people. These are not the building blocks of allegory or parable. Compare Jesus' parables in Matthew -- the sower, the wheat and tares. Parables depict typical human situations using general, representative language. They do not specify seismological events, name a city, or describe appearances to multiple unnamed individuals. The physical specificity of 27:51b-53 is the mark of historical reporting, not symbolic fiction.

Argument 4: Even Skeptical Scholars Acknowledge Matthew's Intent

This is perhaps Dr. Gray's most powerful argument. Several scholars who do not believe the rising saints episode actually happened nevertheless agree that Matthew intended to write it as history. Dale Allison -- a careful, cautious scholar who is deeply uncertain about the resurrection -- states flatly: 'Despite our modern incredulity, the evangelist was thinking about Matthew 27:51-53 as though it really happened.' Allison doubts its historicity. But he does not doubt Matthew's intent.

This concession is decisive. Miller's argument depends on the claim that Matthew intended the rising saints passage as metaphor. But if even skeptical scholars agree that Matthew intended it as history -- even if they think he was wrong -- then Miller's first premise collapses. The rising saints are not a touchstone for metaphorical intent. They are a challenging historical claim, but a claim Matthew meant as history. And if Matthew meant that as history, we have no basis to read the resurrection narrative -- which uses identical language and appears immediately after -- as metaphor.

Dr. Gray's Response — Four Arguments

1. The literary context is uniformly historical. Matthew 27 is a sequential passion narrative. No literary break, no mode-shift signal anywhere near verses 51-53.	2. The vocabulary is identical. ēgerthēsan — aorist passive of egeirō — is the exact word used for every other raising in Matthew. No exception.
3. Physical details point to historical narrative. Earthquake, split rocks, sōmata (bodies), opened tombs, the holy city, appearances to many. Not the language of allegory.	4. Even skeptical scholars concede Matthew's intent. Dale Allison: 'Despite our modern incredulity, the evangelist was thinking about Matthew 27:51-53 as though it really happened.'

Based on the scholarship of Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, Ph.D.

Figure: Dr. Gray's Four Arguments Against Miller

Remaining Difficulties -- Addressed Honestly

Dr. Gray does not pretend that all questions about this passage are resolved. The passage creates an apparent sequencing problem: the earthquake and the opening of the tombs seem to happen at the moment of Jesus' death on Friday, but the saints entered the city 'after Jesus' resurrection' -- Sunday at the earliest. Were their bodies sitting in opened tombs for two days? Dr. Gray acknowledges the difficulty and prefers the most grammatically straightforward reading, despite the puzzling image it creates.

Students often ask: if saints rose from the dead and appeared in Jerusalem, why doesn't any other source mention it? Dr. Gray acknowledges this too. The absence of corroborating evidence is not the same as evidence of absence. A significant portion of the city's population was in the temple district for Passover; we do not know who the 'many people' were or where in the city the appearances occurred. Crucially: none of these difficulties change what Matthew intended. They only mean the passage is difficult and unusual. Difficult and unusual is not the same as metaphorical. If anything, Matthew's willingness to include such a strange and hard-to-explain detail suggests he was not inventing -- a writer creating fiction would have cleaned up the loose ends.

The Crucial Distinction Dr. Gray Draws

There are two separate questions about any difficult biblical passage:

Question 1: What did the author intend? Did Matthew mean this as history, or as symbol?

Question 2: Did it happen? Is the account historically accurate?

These are not the same question. You can believe Matthew intended to write history and still be uncertain about whether the event occurred. Dr. Gray's dissertation answers Question 1. His conclusion: Matthew intended to write history -- in 27:51b-53 and in 28:1-20. The metaphorical interpretation is not demanded by the evidence. It is driven by a prior philosophical assumption that such events cannot have happened.

He Is Not Here

The Empty Tomb and the Resurrection Appearances in Matthew 28

We have spent five sessions preparing to read this chapter. The Jewish background. The vocabulary of *egeiro*. The teachings on hell, judgment, and eternal life. The Sadducee debate. The passion predictions. The rising saints. All of that was in service of being able to read Matthew 28 -- not with the eyes of someone encountering it cold, but with the eyes of someone who understands the world Matthew was writing in and the framework he had been establishing for 27 chapters.

The Guard Story: Both Sides Agree on the Empty Tomb

Matthew is unique among the four Gospels in including the guard story. The day after the crucifixion, the chief priests and Pharisees go to Pilate with a request: post a guard at Jesus' tomb. Their reason: Jesus had predicted he would rise after three days, and they were afraid the disciples would steal his body and announce a fake resurrection.

Dr. Gray draws several significant observations. Jesus' opponents interpreted his resurrection predictions in physically literal terms -- they were not worried about a spiritual event; they were worried about a missing body. The logic of the guard story only makes sense if the entire controversy was about a physical body. No one -- not the disciples, not the authorities -- seems to have considered the possibility that 'resurrection' might mean something non-physical. The concept of a metaphorical resurrection simply does not appear anywhere in Matthew's narrative.

After the resurrection, the guards report to the chief priests. The chief priests bribe them to say the disciples stole the body while they were sleeping. Matthew adds: 'And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.' The authorities' response is not 'the disciples are claiming a vision' or 'they are speaking metaphorically.' Their response is: how do we explain an empty tomb? Both the early church and its opponents agreed that the tomb was empty. They disagreed about why.

The Empty Tomb: Matthew 28:1-8

The women arrive at the tomb early on the first day of the week. An earthquake occurs. An angel descends and rolls back the stone -- not, Matthew is careful to note, to let Jesus out, but so the women can see in. The guards are frozen with fear. And the angel speaks:

Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. —
Matthew 28:5-6

The angel's invitation -- 'Come and see the place where he lay' -- is one of the most revealing details in the chapter. If the resurrection were a vision, or a spiritual event, or a theological metaphor, the place where Jesus had lain would be irrelevant. You do not invite people to see an empty spot to demonstrate a spiritual reality. You invite them to see an empty place to demonstrate a bodily absence. The empty tomb is important precisely because it is the material evidence of a bodily resurrection.

The angel's proclamation -- *egerthe*, 'He has risen' -- uses the word Matthew has used throughout his Gospel for physical raising. The phrasing 'He has risen from the dead' (*Egerthe apo ton nekron*, Matthew 28:7) is the same construction already used when Herod speculated that Jesus might be John the Baptist risen from the dead (14:2). In both cases, the phrase envisions a physical corpse returning to life. The proclamation at the empty tomb is not a departure from Matthew's vocabulary; it is the fulfillment of it.

The First Appearance: Matthew 28:9-10

Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. — Matthew 28:9

Dr. Gray focuses on a single detail that is easy to read past: the women clasped his feet (*krateo* -- a word that denotes physical grip). Recall from Session 3 that the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost when Jesus walked on water (Matthew 14:26). Matthew's audience had a clear concept of what a ghost was -- a non-material entity with no physical substance. Ghosts, in Greek popular belief, were sometimes said to have no feet. When Matthew specifies that the women grasped Jesus' feet, he is making a quiet but pointed claim: this is not a ghost. This is a person with real, physical feet that can be gripped with human hands. The appearance is simultaneously tactile and visual -- the language of physical encounter, not hallucination.

Jesus then gives geographical instructions: go to Galilee, and there you will see me. The risen Jesus has a destination. He will be in a specific place at a specific time. This is person-language, not symbol-language.

The Second Appearance: Matthew 28:16-20

The disciples go to the mountain in Galilee, as Jesus directed. And there they see him:

When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. — Matthew 28:17

Dr. Gray pauses at one of the most striking details in this scene: some doubted. Even at the appearance itself, in the presence of the risen Jesus, some of the eleven disciples doubted. This is a remarkable detail for Matthew to include -- remarkably honest. If Matthew were writing theological fiction, why include this? A fiction writer trying to persuade readers of a spiritual truth would not insert this caveat. The fact that Matthew includes it suggests he is reporting what happened, not crafting an idealized narrative. Awkward historical details are a mark of honest reporting.

Then Jesus speaks the Great Commission: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.' He is heard. He communicates in specific sentences with specific commands. A vision might produce a sense of presence or emotional overwhelming. Specific, propositionally structured speech is the activity of a person -- present, rational, physically real.

Six Characteristics of the Resurrection Body

Based on the full witness of Matthew 28 -- and the broader New Testament -- Dr. Gray identifies six characteristics of the resurrection body:

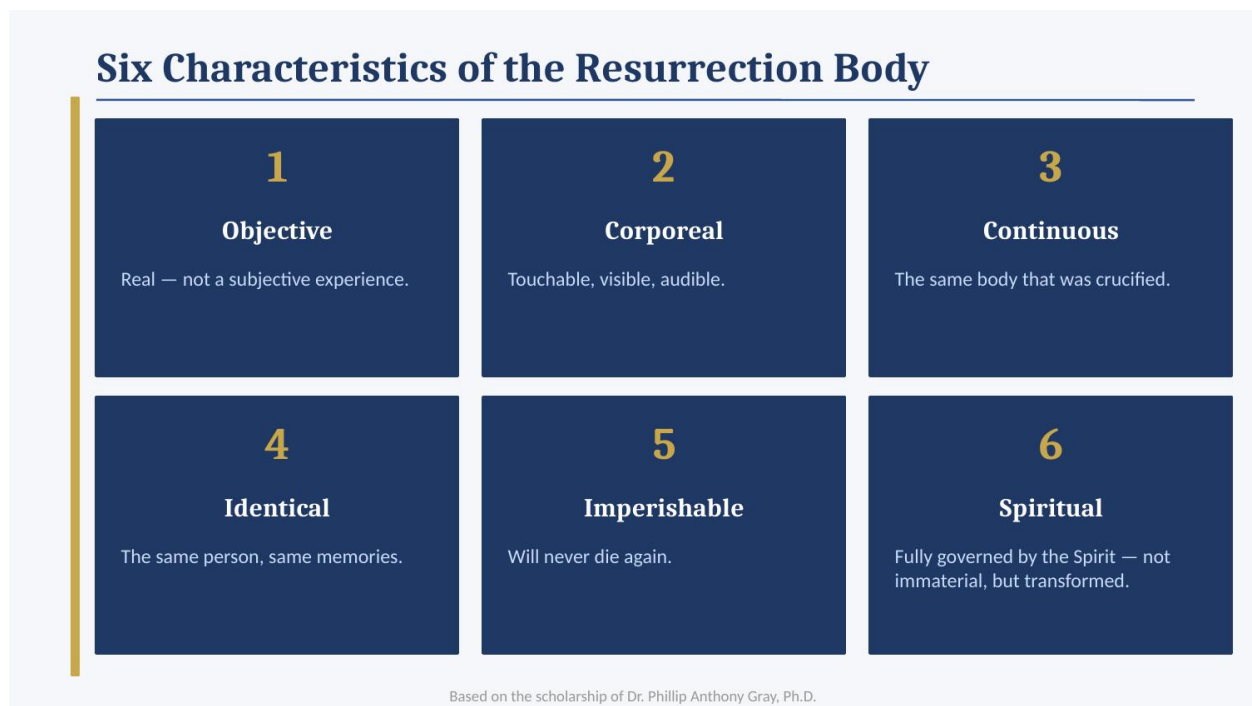


Figure: Six Characteristics of the Resurrection Body

The Six Characteristics of the Resurrection Body

- 1. Objectivity** -- The body was real, not a purely subjective mental experience. It existed independently of the disciples' minds. Multiple people saw the same thing at the same time.
- 2. Corporeality** -- It could be touched, heard, and seen. It occupied space. The women grasped its feet. The disciples heard it speak.
- 3. Continuity** -- It was the same body that had been crucified. John's Gospel records that the nail marks were still visible. The same person who died was raised.
- 4. Identity** -- It was the same person, with the same memories and relationships. The risen Jesus knows his disciples by name and refers to shared history.
- 5. Imperishability** -- Unlike the resuscitated people in the Gospel miracles, Jesus' resurrection body will never die again. He has passed through death permanently and emerged on the other side.
- 6. Spirituality** -- Paul calls it a 'spiritual body' (1 Corinthians 15:44). This does not mean immaterial. It means the body is now fully animated and governed by the Spirit -- freed from the weakness, decay, and limitations of the natural body, but still genuinely corporeal.

The tension between corporeality and spirituality is the most theologically difficult combination. But it is exactly what the New Testament insists on. The resurrection is not a return to ordinary physical life (resuscitation) and it is not a departure from physical existence (a ghost). It is something genuinely new -- a body transformed into an immortal, glorified mode of existence while remaining real, personal, and continuous with the person who died.

Marcus Borg argued that it does not matter whether the resurrection 'could have been captured on a video camera.' Matthew said the opposite: it does matter. The empty place where Jesus lay matters. The feet the women grasped matter. The specific words Jesus spoke on that mountain in Galilee matter. These physical, historical, geographical details are not incidental decoration. They are Matthew's way of saying: *this happened*.

History or Metaphor?

The Final Verdict, the Six Scholars Revisited, and What It Means for Us

We began this series six sessions ago with a question: did Matthew intend his resurrection narrative to be read as literal, historical description -- or as metaphor? We have now followed Dr. Gray's answer through the entire Gospel of Matthew, from the background of ancient Judaism to the proclamation at the empty tomb. It is time to draw the threads together.

Dr. Gray's Two Conclusions

Dr. Gray's Two Conclusions

The Lexical Conclusion: Matthew's vocabulary of resurrection -- traced carefully across every relevant passage in the Gospel -- points consistently to the physical, bodily raising of the dead. The word *egeiro* ('raise') is used throughout Matthew in its literal sense. There is no passage in which Matthew uses resurrection language figuratively. When he applies that vocabulary to Jesus in chapter 28, the default and only supported interpretation is a bodily resurrection: a corpse that was dead is alive again, in a real and transformed body.

The Hermeneutical Conclusion: There is no compelling literary reason to read Matthew's resurrection and appearance narratives as metaphor, parable, midrash, or myth. Matthew writes within a historical genre. He anchors his narrative to verifiable historical realities. His account of the resurrection carries no signals -- no authorial qualifications, no parabolic markers, no hints of figurative intent -- that would invite a non-literal reading. The only reasons to read it otherwise are philosophical (a prior commitment against miracles) or theological (a desire to preserve Christian faith while rejecting the bodily resurrection). These are not literary reasons.

Dr. Gray's final sentence: Matthew intended to report a literal, physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

What Kind of Writing Is Matthew Doing?

Someone might accept everything about *egeiro* and still ask: what if Matthew was writing a kind of theological fiction -- a 'megaparable,' as Crossan calls it -- designed to convey spiritual truth through the vehicle of fiction, without claiming anything literally happened? Dr. Gray addresses this directly.

The current scholarly consensus -- including work by N. T. Wright and Richard Burridge's detailed comparative study -- is that the Gospels belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography (*bioi* in Greek). This genre's default mode is historical: it intends to describe what actually happened. Matthew is not writing a novel or a parable collection; he is writing an

account of a real person's life, death, and -- he claims -- resurrection.

Moreover, Matthew himself consistently distinguishes between his parables and his narrative. When Jesus tells a parable, Matthew uses explicit markers: 'He spoke many things to them in parables, saying...' (13:3). Matthew knows how to signal that a story is a parable. The resurrection narrative carries no such signals. The absence of those markers is significant.

Crossan's 'megaparable' theory must explain why Matthew's parables come clearly labeled -- but the resurrection narrative, allegedly the most important parable of all, comes with no label and every marker of historical narrative. The theory cannot explain this.

Rather than producing theological fiction, Matthew takes pains to anchor his account to verifiable history: the reign of Herod the Great, the rule of Archelaus, the governorship of Pontius Pilate, the geography of Jerusalem, the use of large stones to seal tombs (archaeologically confirmed). These details are not the decoration of a fiction writer; they are the marks of a historian saying: this is where it happened, when it happened, among these historically real people.

The Six Scholars Revisited

The Six Scholars — Final Assessment

Lüdemann

Concedes Matthew intended literal resurrection — argues only about historicity.

Crossan

Inconsistent: acknowledges Jewish bodily resurrection context, then ignores it for Matthew.

Miller

REBUTTED: The touchstone argument fails at its first premise. 27:51b–53 was intended as history.

Borg

Matthew says it does matter — grasped feet, empty tomb, specific geography.

Allison

Largely agrees Matthew intended literal resurrection — differs only on historicity.

Wright

Closest to Gray: Jewish background + NT language = bodily resurrection intended and claimed.

Based on the scholarship of Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, Ph.D.

Figure: Six Scholars -- Final Assessment

The Six Scholars -- Final Assessment

Gerd Ludemann: Ludemann grants, without dispute, that Matthew's Gospel depicts a literal bodily resurrection. His quarrel is with historical reliability, not Matthew's intent. In a striking way, Dr. Gray's research supports Ludemann's concession: yes, Matthew intended a physical resurrection -- exactly as Ludemann admits. Where they differ is on the further question of whether it happened.

John Dominic Crossan: Crossan acknowledges that mainstream first-century Judaism expected a literal, physical resurrection. But he refuses to let this govern his reading of Matthew. Dr. Gray's response: this is inconsistent. Crossan's 'megaparable' theory is driven by a prior rejection of miracles, not by literary evidence.

Robert J. Miller: Miller's touchstone argument was the primary target of Dr. Gray's research. His argument required 27:51b-53 to be clearly metaphorical, so that the resurrection narrative that follows would read the same way. Dr. Gray dismantled this: the rising saints passage uses the same physical vocabulary as every other resurrection passage in Matthew, and even skeptical scholars concede Matthew intended it as history. Miller's argument fails at its first premise.

Marcus Borg: Borg argues that whether the resurrection 'could have been filmed' is irrelevant. Dr. Gray's response: for Matthew, it was very relevant. The empty place, the grasped feet, the specific geography, the audible speech -- Matthew's account is precisely a claim about what a camera could in principle have captured. Borg's framework is simply incompatible with the kind of writing Matthew is doing.

Dale C. Allison Jr.: Allison already agrees with Dr. Gray that Matthew intended a literal physical resurrection. His uncertainty is about whether it happened, not about what Matthew meant. His conclusion -- that the Synoptic writers 'thought they were reconfiguring memories of Jesus, not inventing theological tales' -- actually aligns closely with Gray's position.

N. T. Wright: Wright's conclusions align most closely with Dr. Gray's. Both argue that the Jewish background vocabulary establishes that 'resurrection' in Matthew's context meant bodily resurrection, and both argue that the New Testament writers intended to describe a literal, historical event.

The Personal Question

Dr. Gray's research does not answer the question of whether the resurrection of Jesus actually happened. That is a historical question -- and while the evidence is, in Dr. Gray's view, strong, it lies beyond the scope of his dissertation. What his research does is close off the escape route of saying 'Matthew didn't really mean it literally.' He did mean it literally. The question is now squarely before us.

The Resurrection and How We Grieve

The apostle Paul writes to a community that had experienced deaths among its members: 'We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope' (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Paul is not saying: do not grieve. He is saying: do not grieve like those who have no hope. There is a different way to grieve -- a grief shaped by the conviction that the person who died will be raised, bodily, in a final resurrection. The physicality of the resurrection hope is the precise thing that makes it a genuine comfort rather than a polite sentiment. If the resurrection is metaphorical, it cannot bear the weight of grief. It becomes a beautiful idea, not a promise.

The Resurrection and How We Live

If the resurrection is literally true -- if Jesus was bodily raised and if we will be bodily raised -- then the decisions we make with our bodies matter eternally. What we do with our physical existence is not irrelevant to God or to the future. C. S. Lewis wrote about the error of thinking Christianity is primarily about spiritual experience while the body is just a vehicle. The Christian hope, he said, is about the full person -- body and soul -- perfected and raised in a new creation. Dr. Gray's research on Matthew is, at its deepest level, an argument in defense of that fully embodied hope.

The Resurrection and Faith in the Face of Doubt

We noted in Session 6 that 'some doubted' even at the appearance of the risen Jesus on the mountain in Galilee. The Great Commission was given to a group that included doubters. Faith and doubt are not opposites. Thomas, who doubted, was not excluded from the community or the commission -- he was invited to see and to touch. The honest uncertainty of Dale Allison, the intellectual wrestling of people across centuries who have taken the resurrection seriously and still found it hard, is not a disqualification. The question that matters is: what do you do with the evidence? What does Matthew's text, honestly read, require you to say about his intent? Dr. Gray's answer is clear. He is not asking anyone to find it easy. He is asking everyone -- scholar and layperson alike -- to follow the evidence honestly.

Honoring a Scholar

This series was built on the work of Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, who submitted his research as a doctoral dissertation at Amridge University's Turner School of Theology in 2016. Writing a doctoral dissertation requires years of sustained, rigorous effort -- reading widely, arguing carefully, engaging with ideas that challenge your own conclusions, and submitting your work to the scrutiny of scholars who will test every claim. Dr. Gray did all of that.

What makes his work particularly valuable is its method: inductive, evidence-based, faithful to the text. He did not begin with the conclusion he wanted and then find proof for it. He worked through Matthew, passage by passage, word by word, building the case from the ground up. His conclusion is not merely academic. The question of whether Matthew intended a literal resurrection is one of the most consequential questions in the history of Christianity. If Matthew intended metaphor, the entire Christian tradition has fundamentally misread its own founding document. If Matthew intended history -- as Dr. Gray demonstrates -- then we stand within a tradition that has always been reading correctly, even when the reading is difficult and

demanding.

Matthew intended to report a literal, physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead. — Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, Ph.D.

Series Summary: What Dr. Gray's Research Establishes

The first-century Jewish world expected bodily resurrection -- specifically the Pharisees, the dominant party in Palestinian Judaism. This was Matthew's world.

The Septuagint used resurrection vocabulary (egeiro, anistemi) in key Old Testament texts, establishing that language for Greek-speaking Jews.

Matthew's implicit teachings on hell, judgment, the soul, and eternal life all assume a bodily resurrection of the wicked as well as the righteous.

The Greek verb egeiro appears throughout Matthew with a consistent, physical meaning: a dead body physically returning to life. There is no figurative use of this word anywhere in Matthew -- not once.

The Sadducee debate (Matthew 22) is the only direct discussion of resurrection in the Gospel, and Jesus' answer affirms bodily resurrection while clarifying that the resurrection state will be transformed.

The rising saints passage (Matthew 27:51b-53) uses identical vocabulary and narrative style to the surrounding passion account. Even skeptical scholars concede that Matthew intended it as history.

Matthew 28 is saturated with physical detail: an empty place, grasped feet, audible speech, geographical movement. This is the language of a person present in space, not a vision or spiritual experience.

The metaphorical readings find no support in Matthew's actual language or literary practice. They are driven by a prior philosophical commitment against the possibility of miracles.

Closing

Seven sessions. One argument. One verdict.

Matthew's Gospel, read on its own terms -- from chapter 1 to chapter 28, in the vocabulary it actually uses, within the cultural world it was written in -- presents the resurrection of Jesus as a literal, physical, bodily event. The Greek word *egeiro*, consistent in meaning throughout 28 chapters, bears the full weight of that claim. The rising saints of Matthew 27, the empty tomb of Matthew 28, the women who grasped the feet of the risen Jesus, the disciples who heard him speak on a mountain in Galilee -- all of these details are written in the language of history, not the language of parable.

The scholars who argue for a metaphorical reading have not found literary evidence in Matthew's text. They have brought a prior philosophical assumption -- that miracles cannot happen -- and used it to override what the text actually says. Dr. Gray's research demonstrates this plainly, patiently, and without rancor. He does not ask his readers to find the resurrection easy. He asks them to follow Matthew honestly.

That is the invitation this series extends to you. Read Matthew. Follow the evidence. And let the Gospel speak for itself.

About the Source Scholarship

This Bible study is based entirely on the doctoral research of Dr. Phillip Anthony Gray, Ph.D.

Is Matthew the Touchstone? That the Metaphorical Resurrection Hypothesis Finds No Confirmation in Matthew's Gospel

Doctoral Dissertation • Amridge University • Turner School of Theology • 2016

All scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted.
