

Did Jesus really die on the cross?

Question:

A deep study of Christian Science is new to me. I was told recently that Jesus did not really die on the cross according to Christian Science teaching. Another website quoted Mary Baker Eddy as saying that Jesus' followers "saw him after his crucifixion and learned that he had not died." How can that be when the Bible clearly says that he did die? Please explain this to me as it is critical to my belief in Christianity.

Response:

The quote you mention — which is from Mary Baker Eddy's primary work *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, p. 46 — is one that unfortunately seems to have been taken out of context. Read as a whole, the chapter "Atonement and Eucharist", in which this quote appears, makes clear that Jesus' actual physical death on the cross, his resurrection, and his ascension are vital and fundamental points of Christian Science theology.

Christian Scientists, like other Christians, affirm that Jesus on the cross experienced the same death of the flesh that all human beings pass through. As you say, the Bible clearly shows that those who witnessed his crucifixion and the friends who buried him afterwards observed the death of his material body.

What Christian Science emphasizes is that even after this physical death, Jesus' true being and identity lived on, at one with his Father, God, untouched by mortality. Similarly to many other Christian theologies, Christian Science holds that what mortals see as death is never the end of an individual's existence, even though it seems so final to those looking on.

A study of Jesus' healings — especially of the times when he raised the dead — suggests that he had a totally different understanding of "reality" from most people. What he said amazed people, angered them or made them scoff at him. Consider what he said about Jairus' daughter and Lazarus:

All were weeping and mourning her, but he said, "Don't weep. She isn't dead, but sleeping." They were ridiculing him, knowing that she was dead. (WEB Luke 8:52-53; see also Matt. 9:23-24, Mark 5:39-40)

...he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. (NRSV John 11:11-13)

The words and actions of Jesus indicate that despite all appearances, life is eternal.

In *Science and Health*, Mary Baker Eddy writes:

There were rock-ribbed walls in the way, and a great stone must be rolled from the cave's mouth; but Jesus vanquished every material obstacle, overcame every law of matter, and stepped forth from his gloomy resting-place, crowned with the glory of a sublime success, an everlasting victory.

Our Master fully and finally demonstrated divine Science in his victory over death and the grave. Jesus' deed was for the enlightenment of men and for the salvation of the whole world from sin, sickness, and death.... Three days after his bodily burial he talked with his disciples. The persecutors had failed to hide immortal Truth and Love in a sepulchre.

Glory be to God, and peace to the struggling hearts! (pp. 44-45)

Jesus could have withdrawn himself from his enemies. He had power to lay down a human sense of life for his spiritual identity in the likeness of the divine; but he allowed men to attempt the destruction of the mortal body in order that he might furnish the proof of immortal life. Nothing could kill this Life of man. Jesus could give his temporal life into his enemies' hands; but when his earth-mission was accomplished, his spiritual life, indestructible and eternal, was found forever the same. (p. 51)

Through his resurrection — his victory over death — Jesus gave the supreme proof for all humanity that death does not and cannot destroy the life that God gives. It is in this sense that Mary Baker Eddy writes that “he had not died,” echoing Jesus' own words: “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-26).