

Review: JAR160311

## ***RISEN AND THE APOLOGETICS OF LOVE***

a Movie Review of

*Risen*

Directed by Kevin Reynolds

(Sony Pictures, 2016)

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*Risen* tells the story of Clavius, a Roman tribune in Jerusalem whom Pontius Pilate tasks with finding the missing body of the crucified Jesus (called “Yeshua the Nazarene” in the film, using his Hebrew name). Most reviewers have described the movie as a kind of CSI-style detective story. That description certainly captures the tone of the first half of the film, which focuses on Clavius’s investigation. Clavius, along with his right-hand man Lucius, interviews witnesses, gathers evidence, and tracks down Jesus’ disciples. Rumor has it that Jesus has risen from the dead, though Claudius is as skeptical as a modern-day police detective. Yet for a detective story, there isn’t a lot of mystery, since we the audience already know that Jesus is indeed risen. (It is in the title of the movie, after all!) The suspense is more about what it will take to convince Clavius to accept the Resurrection.

This set-up seems to promise a cinematic apologetics textbook: evidence that demands a verdict. But Clavius doesn’t infer the truth of the Resurrection from the evidence he gathers. Rather, he tracks the disciples to the upper room where he sees the risen Jesus with his own eyes. At that point—only halfway into the movie!—Clavius accepts the fact of the Resurrection, and the detective plot ends. The rest of the movie involves Clavius wrestling with the meaning of the resurrection.

Unique among movies about Jesus, *Risen* begins on Good Friday but then focuses primarily on the forty days after the Resurrection that Jesus spent with His disciples prior to the Ascension (Acts 1:3). Clavius is a fictional character, but the story largely follows the biblical narrative, complete with at least seven miracles: the darkened sky and earthquake described in Matthew 27:45 and 51, the image of Jesus’ body miraculously imprinted on His burial shroud (i.e., the Shroud of Turin, which is *not* a miracle recorded in the Bible), the Resurrection, Jesus disappearing from the upper room, the miraculous catch of fish described in John 21:4–6, the healing of a leper, and Jesus’s Ascension into heaven.

These events are portrayed rather realistically and seem somewhat more believable than the miracles in many Jesus movies that are often sensationalistic and, for lack of a better word, “cheesy.” In fact, many of the miracles, especially early in the film, are as genuinely uncanny and unsettling as they must have been in real life—a tribute to director Kevin Reynolds’s skill as a filmmaker. Indeed, the film has a basic level of filmmaking competence (camera work, editing, writing, acting) that is typically lacking in faith-based films.

**A Movie for Seekers.** Refreshingly, *Risen* doesn’t set up a contrast between faith and doubt. Only someone with enough faith to care about the truth is capable of doubt. Pilate is the villain of the film because he is simply not concerned about the evidence of the Resurrection or the truth of Christianity. All he cares about is power. Confronted with evidence of the resurrection, Lucius suggests, “Maybe it’s true,” to which Pilate nonchalantly replies, “Then I’ll kill him again.”

Clavius, on the other hand, is the hero of the film, because he is a seeker. Caiaphas pays the tomb’s guards to lie and say that the disciples stole the body (following Matthew 28:11–15). Clavius,

however, knows it is a lie. At one point, he even produces a different crucified corpse that could serve as staged “evidence” that Jesus was not resurrected. But, unlike Pilate and Caiaphas, Clavius is interested in more than maintaining political power. He wants to know the truth. Clavius is dissatisfied with his life. He believes there has to be more out there. But when he interviews Mary Magdalene about her claim to have seen the resurrected Jesus, she intriguingly tells him, “You’re looking for the wrong thing.”

**Pax Romana vs. Pax Christi.** Clavius sees the world in military terms. For Clavius, even religion is a political struggle between the Roman god Mars and the Hebrew God. Whereas Pilate is portrayed as a philosopher, partial to Minerva the Roman goddess of wisdom, Clavius the soldier claims to worship only Mars, the god of war. In other words, Clavius only puts his trust in military strength, which for him is the only path to peace — a perfect symbol of the Pax Romana.

The movie itself starts with a battle between the Romans and the zealots, led by Barabbas, who on Good Friday, according to the biblical timeline, would have been released just that morning. Barabbas was a would-be military “messiah” who went right back to the battle as soon as he was released. Thus the filmmakers set the story in a context of unending violence and political struggle.

Clavius, however, longs to escape from the cycle of violence. When Pilate asks him about his ambitions, Clavius says that his goal is to serve in Rome, the center of wealth and power. But why, asks Pilate? What will that bring you? Clavius confesses that what he really wants is a family and a villa in the countryside where at last he might find peace and “an end to death.” Pilate wonders, “Is there no other way” to find peace?

The high priest Caiaphas, too, claims to seek peace. When he comes to Pilate to ask for Roman guards at the tomb to prevent the disciples from stealing Jesus’s body to fake a resurrection (as described in Matthew 27:64), Caiaphas tells Pilate he is seeking “peace” and argues that if Jesus’ body “vanishes,” then that would inspire the people to rebel and threaten the Roman governor’s ability to keep peace.

Both the Romans and the Jews see peace as secured by military power. When Pilate first tells Clavius about Jesus, he describes Him as an “ascetic,” emphasizing Jesus’ rejection of worldly power. Likewise, the Centurion at the foot of the Cross is moved by Jesus’ refusal to fight back, saying it was as if “He wanted to be sacrificed.” This is a nod to the Christian doctrine of atonement, but also a reiteration of Christ’s nonviolence.

Jesus has a very different idea about peace and power. Clavius asks Joseph of Arimathea if he believes that Jesus is the “messiah” who has risen from the dead “to lead Israel against Rome.” Joseph replies, “I believe that if He had lived, Yeshua would have embraced you as a brother, even as you slew Him.” This is not far off from what actually happens when Clavius does encounter the risen Jesus. When he enters the upper room, Clavius is shocked to see Jesus among the disciples gathered there. Jesus welcomes him in, calling him “brother” and saying, “There are no enemies here.”

These are the same words Clavius later says to Lucius. After Clavius leaves Jerusalem to accompany the disciples to Galilee to meet Jesus again, Lucius tracks them and confronts them in the desert. Clavius overpowers Lucius with his superior military skill, but he does not kill him. “There are no enemies here,” he says, beginning to follow Jesus’ way of nonviolence. He lays down his sword and says, “No one dies today,” realizing that the end of death he seeks can only come when we refuse to kill those who believe they are our enemies.

**What Will Convince You?** From an apologetics point of view, it is interesting that seeing the risen Jesus does not resolve all of Clavius’s questions or result in his immediate conversion. Too often apologists assume that establishing objective evidence of the Resurrection would somehow prove the truth of Christianity. *Risen* rightly recognizes that the fact of a risen Jesus would not by itself answer all our questions. It would not *necessarily* prove the divinity of Christ or even the truth of Christ’s teachings. Plenty of eye-witnesses experienced Jesus’s miracles and teaching first-hand but rejected His claim to be their Savior. In fact, Scripture reports that some among the eleven disciples still had doubts when they saw the risen Christ (Matt. 28:17). To be sure, in the modern world, skepticism about the fact of Christ’s Resurrection is a significant obstacle to faith, and apologists ought to respond to those who attempt to cast doubt on the historicity of the Resurrection. And the fact of the Resurrection would certainly go a

long way toward vindicating Christ's teachings. But at the same time, there will always be a gap between acknowledging the historical fact that Jesus rose from the dead and believing the saving truth that Jesus is Lord.

In the film, Peter admits to Clavius that he "doesn't have all the answers." Even the objective truth of Christ's resurrection leaves open the subjective questions of *What does Christ's resurrection mean for me* and *How should I respond to Christ?* *Risen* is a good reminder to apologists to face these questions in addition to the more typical questions of objective historical evidence. It is also an opportunity to engage with skeptics. We might ask a skeptic what experiences would convince him to believe in Christ? Would being an eyewitness of the Resurrection be enough? What is the skeptic truly seeking?

These are the questions that *Risen* has Jesus Himself pose to Clavius just before the Ascension. "What will it take to convince you?" Jesus asks. "With your own eyes you have seen, and yet you still doubt? What frightens you?" "Being wrong," Clavius replies. But Jesus knows there is more than mere skepticism at work. "What is it you seek?" Jesus asks him. Then, echoing the conversation Clavius had with Pilate earlier, Jesus adds, "A day without death?" Jesus knows that Clavius seeks inner peace, not mere intellectual certainty.

Ultimately Clavius is seeking an end to death. After seeing the risen Jesus in the upper room, Clavius tells Lucius, "I have seen two things which I cannot reconcile." He seems to be referring to seeing the dead body of Jesus in the tomb and later the same Jesus alive again. But it is not only that he cannot reconcile the Resurrection with his understanding of death; it is that he cannot reconcile Jesus' love of enemies with his understanding of peace through military power.

**The Apologetic of Love.** Clavius needs his mind lifted up to higher things (Col. 3:2). The first witness Clavius interviews is an old blind woman who says Jesus "loved me. He lifted me up." It is as if she, like Jesus, has "risen." Clavius, too, needs to be lifted up and made to hope for something more than military power and worldly peace. Clavius needs to be transformed through the renewing of his mind (Rom. 12:2). He needs to have a new understanding of power (1 Cor. 1:18–25) and a new understanding of peace (Phil. 4:7). This transformation does not happen immediately for Clavius. Simply seeing the risen Jesus does not instantaneously change his worldview. Instead, his way of thinking begins to change gradually as he walks to Galilee with the disciples.

When Peter confesses that the disciples had doubts about Jesus all along, Clavius asks Peter directly, "Then what made you follow Him?" Just then a leper passes by, being beaten and driven out of the area because of his condition. When Jesus embraces him and heals his disease, Peter looks at Clavius and says, "That's why." This scene is ambiguous. Is Peter saying that the disciples followed Jesus because of His miraculous power? Maybe. But it seems to fit better with Clavius's story if Peter is referring to Jesus's love and willingness to embrace those whom society rejects. Some of the disciples may have started following Jesus out of desire for miraculous health or for a political revolution or even eternal life, but then Jesus' love transformed them, lifting them to something higher. As John says after the Ascension, the disciples' transformation is not just about "life eternal" but also about "how life is lived" now and "how love changes you."

Clavius does not seem to be entirely convinced, even at the end of the film. He still has many doubts and questions. But he was, without doubt, changed by his encounter with Jesus' love. The film ends with Clavius giving away his ring, the sign of his authority as a Roman tribune, signaling that he has definitively left the life of military power and ambition. As he tells his story, the listener asks him, "Do you believe all this?" And he responds, "I believe I can never be the same."

As a fictional film, *Risen* obviously could never offer any objective evidence for the truth of Christianity. The fact that a fictional character witnesses the Resurrection of Christ adds nothing to the real-world historical record. But it is significant that Clavius was not converted by historical evidence, either. His conversion was a slow process that began by spending time with the disciples, by eating with them, seeing how they welcomed him even though he had persecuted them, and seeing how love had changed their lives. Clavius's story reminds us that our lives themselves are an apology for Christ. The most convincing argument for the truth of Christianity may be how we love one another (John 13:34–35).

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