

RESEARCH REFLECTION

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*An Easter Surprise: Majority of Americans
Believe in Jesus' Resurrection*

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An Easter Surprise: Majority of Americans Believe in Jesus' Resurrection

We all probably know a Christmas-Easter church goer. Easter Sunday is one of those few times throughout the year that he or she may actually attend church. In preparation for this high attendance Sunday, pastors will be busy preparing their sermons, musicians and choirs will be polishing their cantatas, and church buildings everywhere will be donned with Easter lilies and the various symbols of the Passion Week. However, in the midst of all this preparation, many churches may unknowingly underestimate commonly held beliefs surrounding the resurrection of Christ among those in their community.

Prior to this year's Easter Season, the Center for Missional Research wanted to find out how prevalent the belief in the physical resurrection of Christ really is among the general public. Through a random sample of interviews among 1,204 adults across the United States, we were able to find some interesting and somewhat unanticipated results.¹

Surprising belief

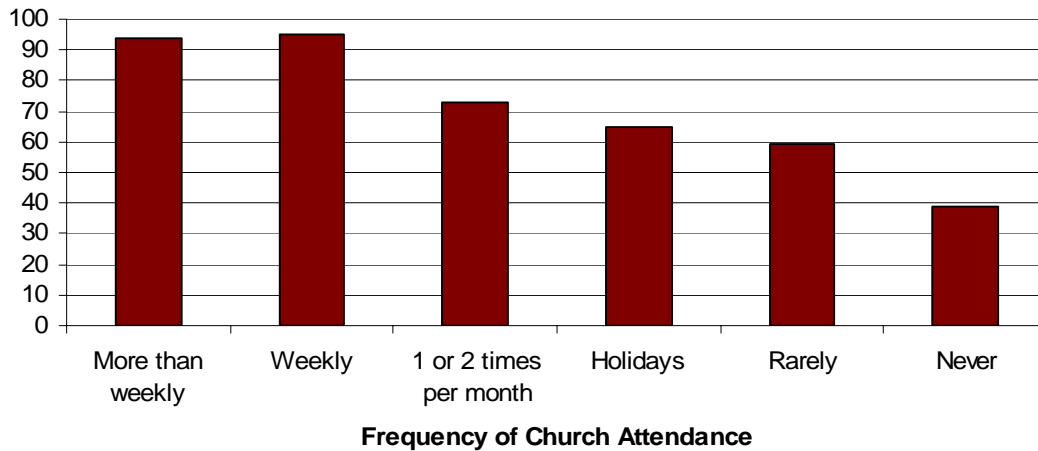
For instance, it may come as a surprise that over 75 percent of the U.S. general public believe the biblical account of Jesus literally coming back to life in his physical body. In fact, the survey question read: "The Bible and the Christian faith claim that on the first Easter Sunday, the physical body of Jesus came back to life after being dead since his crucifixion on the previous Friday. Do you believe Jesus literally rose from the dead?"

One would presume that born-again Christians believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ, and our study supported that assumption; however, our research also revealed that over 75 percent of those claiming to not be born-again also believe in Jesus' resurrection.² When comparing the frequency of church attendance in our sample with their belief in the resurrection, those who rarely or never attend church believe in the resurrection of Christ 59 and 39 percent respectively. Apparently, our contemporaries are less skeptical of scriptural events like the resurrection than we may often realize.

¹ Results are based on a telephone survey conducted among 1,204 randomly selected American adults by Zogby International March 22 through March 26, 2007. The margin of error for this sample is +/- 2.9 percentage points. Margins of error are higher for sub-groups.

² Only Protestants were asked of their born-again classification; however, a sizeable percent (67%) of non-Protestants (which include those adhering to Catholicism, Judaism, other and no religions) still believed in the resurrection.

Percentage of Respondents Who Believe that Jesus Literally Rose from the Dead

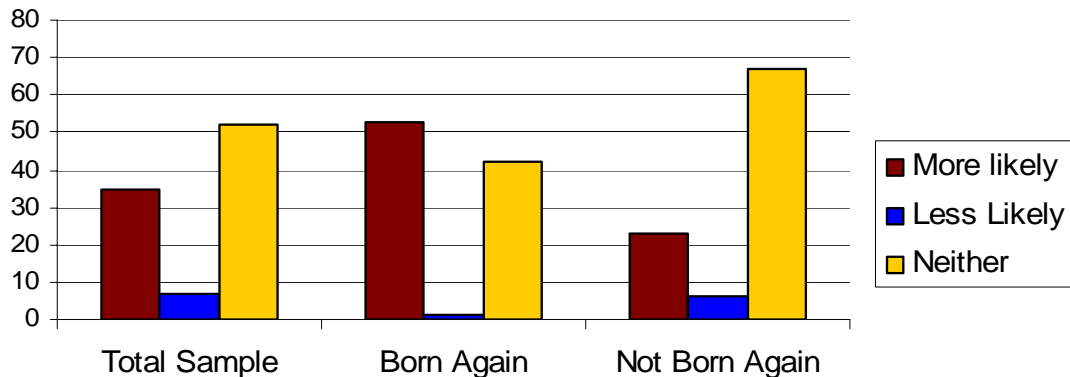


Surprising influence

Our Easter research did not stop there. We were also aware of the recent and controversial documentary by James Cameron, “The Lost Tomb of Jesus.” This documentary, recently aired on the Discovery Channel, investigated the supposed ossuary containing the skeletal remains of Jesus. While the Bible is very clear that Jesus died, was buried, and came back to life, we wanted to see how this documentary may affect the general public’s belief in the resurrection. The research showed that 57 percent of the population either read about, heard about, or watched this documentary. Familiarity with the documentary had no impact on the public view of the resurrection, as about 75 percent of both those with and without knowledge of the documentary believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. It appears that belief in the resurrection neither drew them to watch the documentary nor influenced their belief.

Our final Easter question asked respondents if they would be more or less likely to attend a church service this year on Easter Sunday after hearing about or watching the TV documentary by James Cameron. Overall, 35 percent of the population said they were more likely to attend an Easter service. Although it is a low percentage, it still represents a large portion of the American public. Only 7 percent said the documentary decreased the likelihood they would attend church this Easter. Significantly, 23 percent of those who claim to not be born again stated they would be more likely to attend an Easter Sunday service due to the documentary. Following the same trend, 21 percent of those who rarely attend any church service are also more likely to attend an Easter Sunday service after hearing about or watching the Cameron documentary. Again, this fairly low percentage translates into hundreds of thousands of people in the United States.

Percentage of Respondents Who Heard Of or Viewed the Cameron Documentary and Their Likelihood of Attending a Church Service This Easter Sunday



Surprising opportunity

So, what can we learn from these numbers? First, the general public, and even those who only show up at our churches on Easter and Christmas, may actually agree with the greeting, “Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed!” Our message to congregants on Easter Sunday may not require a defense of the physical resurrection so much as an explanation to its meaning and redemptive power for the individual sitting in the pew. And guess what—people carry their beliefs with them in our communities throughout the year. Three of the next 4 adults you encounter probably believe this foundational truth of the Christian faith.

Second, we should not always be quick to judge the apparent influence of secular films concerning Christ, such as this documentary or the Da Vinci Code, but instead see the missional opportunities that emerge in their wake. As was discovered in our study surrounding the release of the Da Vinci Code movie ([click here](#) to see the study), the general public’s exposure to these portrayals of Christ, albeit false, often increase the likelihood of individuals being open to an evangelistic discussion and sometimes even accepting an offer to come to church.

As you prepare for this Easter, and think of ways to use this season for the glory of God, do not give up on people. Many may already believe *about* Christ even though many do not believe *in* Him. God may give you a surprise.