

## The Resurrection of Jesus

*(A talk given to an ecumenical churches audience in Birmingham, U.K.)*

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The previous talks in this series have been devotional. But this time we are going to do some Bible study, focussing on the New Testament material on the resurrection.

As we hear the Gospels read in church, or read them ourselves at home, we normally hear or read a single passage by itself. And it is natural to assume that this is an eye witness account of what the reporter observed. But when, following the New Testament scholars, we compare the different accounts of the same event or saying in the different Gospels, problems arise. And these problems and their implications have been pursued in detail by the New Testament scholars.

Some of you will know a lot about the results of modern biblical scholarship, but others not. So let me start with some basics. The first thing to be said is that the scholars differ among themselves about most things. When we take account of their work we have left the firm ground of unquestioned certainties, which we all instinctively prefer, and we've entered the inevitable uncertainties of historical research. There is however a central area of very wide consensus among reputable scholars, although even here there is always someone somewhere who differs on some point. But there is nevertheless a broad central consensus.

What is this consensus? It is agreed that none of the Gospels was written by an eye witness, or even by people who had met Jesus in person. The earliest gospel, Mark, was written around 70 AD, then Matthew and Luke in the 80's, using Mark as their primary source, along with another presumed common source called Q (which however some major scholars

dispute), as well as other separate sources and inventive writing of their own. And finally John's Gospel was written towards the end of the century, in the 90's or possibly even later. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptic Gospels because they have so much material in common, in contrast to John, which has a very different character. In the synoptics, Jesus speaks in his unforgettable parables and short vivid sayings and commands, whilst in John he often utters long theological discourses, and the theology embodied in them is much more developed in the direction of what became Christian orthodoxy than in the synoptics.

The sources which they used would be stories handed down within different parts of the Christian community, which by then, thanks mainly to St Paul, had moved out into the gentile world and was sprinkled around the Mediterranean. Many people before the days of widespread literacy did have an extremely retentive memory for traditional stories; but even so traditional stories tend to develop in the telling and retelling over the decades and generations, particularly when they spread into new environments and cultures far from the place of their origin.

Further, the current trend in New Testament studies today, the dating of the documents having been pretty well established, and what is called textual criticism and form criticism having been absorbed, is to concentrate on the different points of view and creativity of the different Gospel writers. I am not however going to stress this now because I am dealing mainly with prior issues.

What is the effect of all this on the resurrection narratives? In our usual understanding of the resurrection we tend to amalgamate what the different Gospels say, not noticing the many points at which they disagree. Easter centres on the resurrection message

that Jesus was crucified and buried, and on third day rose from the dead. The questions raised by the New Testament scholars focus on what 'rose from the dead' means. There can be no doubt that something enormously significant happened which we call the resurrection. But what was that event or series of events?

There are two streams of New Testament tradition which can call the bodily tradition and the visions tradition. The bodily tradition, according to Luke in his Gospel and in Acts, is of an empty tomb and the risen body of Jesus appearing to the disciples from time to time over a period of forty days, and then ascending bodily into heaven. The visions tradition is one of probably several of visions of Jesus which gave the disciples a powerful sense of his presence with them and inspired them to remain faithful to him and to witness to his memory and his teachings.

I ought to mention at this point a very radical possibility, and then leave it hanging, so to speak, because I'm not going to take it up - I just don't know what weight it has. But some scholars (e.g., Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord*, 1994, Fortress Press, p.180; followed by John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 1998, New York: HarperCollins, pp. xxvii, 528, 555) believe that the whole story of Joseph of Arimathea and his family tomb, and Jesus' burial in it, is a later creation. According to them the dead bodies of crucified criminals were by the Roman soldiers thrown into a limed pit, which dissolves the body quickly and hygienically, and this is the reason why virtually no skeletal remains have been found of the thousands who were crucified outside Jerusalem in the first century. Is this correct? It could be, but frankly I don't know and I'm not going to assume so.

What I would like to do is to ask you to notice the inconsistencies that appear when we compare the different Gospels. Part of the bodily tradition is that Jesus' body was laid in a

tomb provided by Joseph of Aramathea. But that is incompatible with another strand of Christian tradition which says that it was not his disciples who buried Jesus but the Jews who had engineered his death. We get this in Acts 13: 18-19, reporting a speech by St Paul in which he says, 'Though they [the Jewish authorities] could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they [the Jewish authorities] took him down from the tree, and laid him in a tomb'. This seems omit 'also' incompatible with the Joseph of Aramathea story. Some commentators make the point that Luke is concerned to blame the Jews for Jesus' death. But one puzzle is that Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are both believed to have been written by the same person, whom we call Luke. So Luke in Acts differs here from Luke in his Gospel, which has the Joseph of Aramathea story (chap. 23). What are we to make of this? I don't know. But this is the sort of problem that appears when you start to look closely at the texts.

Let us now return to the empty tomb and the bodily resurrection tradition, and focus on the physical aspect. On the one hand, the disciples saw the wounds in the hands and feet of the risen Jesus (Luke), the women at the tomb, meeting Jesus in the garden, 'held on to his feet' (Matthew), and he ate fish with them in Galilee (Luke and John). That indicates something thoroughly bodily, physical. None of this comes, however, in the earlier Mark. But the bodily tradition also holds that the risen Jesus could suddenly materialise in a room without having come through the door, and could equally suddenly disappear after breaking bread at supper with the two disciples on the Emmaeus road. This materialising and dematerialising would also have to apply to his clothes. There is also the strange fact that the resurrected Jesus was several times not at first recognised - in John's gospel by Mary Magdalene at the

tomb, who thought him to be the gardener, and in Luke by the disciples on the Emmaus road who carried on a long conversation with him without realising that this was Jesus. And there is also Matthew's puzzling statement that Jesus appeared to the disciples on a mountain in Galilee 'but some doubted', though 'doubted' may possibly be too strong, with something like 'wondered' instead (Matt. 28: 17). But either way, there are strange aspects, and what is customarily said is that the risen body was indeed the body that had been placed in the tomb, but somehow transformed or transfigured or transmuted so that it did not now have to obey the ordinary laws of physics. This would account for Jesus suddenly appearing in bodily form in a locked room, but not for some of his disciples not recognising him. So there are still many puzzles.

Yet another puzzle is, why would the transformed Jesus, if he could pass through walls into a locked room, and appear and disappear at will, need any help in getting out of the tomb? Why should an angel have to come down and roll away the stone (Matthew)? Would it not have been a much stronger proof of his bodily resurrection if the tomb had remained sealed, and then officially discovered to be empty when they opened it up? So it seems that the fact that the tomb was already open when the women arrived early on the Sunday morning weakens, if anything, rather than strengthens the traditional story - not only because it seems unnecessary but also because it leaves space for the allegation, which was in fact made at the time (Matt. 28: 11-15), that someone removed the body. These are difficult, possibly unanswerable, questions, and I can only leave them with you.

Going back now to the scholarly consensus, another part of it concerns the last chapter of Mark's gospel, telling of appearances to Mary Magdalene, then to two unnamed disciples, then to the rest and to the eleven as they sat at table, and charging them to preach the gospel

throughout the world, saying 'He who is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned'; and finally reporting that Jesus was taken up into heaven to sit at the right hand of God. However none of this is in the earliest manuscripts and is universally believed to have been a later addition. Because of this many modern versions in English now leave a gap in the print between Mark 16: 8 and what follows, the original gospel having ended at 16:8. This original ending is enigmatic. The two Marys, Magdalene and Jesus' mother, go to the tomb early on the Sunday morning to anoint the body. They find the stone already rolled aside and a young man in a white robe - in Mathew this is an angel and in Luke two angels - who in Mark tells them that Jesus is risen and will appear to Peter and the disciples in Galilee; and then it ends 'And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.' So Mark gives us the empty tomb and a promise of appearances to come to Galilee, but no actual appearances, and by implication rules out any appearances in Jerusalem.

Matthew and Luke follow Mark as far as his original ending, but then diverge so much that it is not possible to harmonise them with one another or with John. Luke has no appearances in Galilee. According to him the only appearances are in Jerusalem and on the nearby Emmaus road. There is also an appearance to Peter, and then all the disciples together, Jesus suddenly appearing among them, and then they go out to Bethany, and Jesus is carried up into heaven. All this happens in the Jerusalem area on the same day. And the Acts of the Apostles, by the same writer, again restricts the appearances to Jerusalem, instructing the disciples to remain there until they are baptized with the Holy Spirit - referring to Pentecost. Acts then describes the ascension: 'And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight' (Acts 1: 9). That's Luke.

Matthew on the other hand reports an earthquake and an angel descending to remove the stone from the tomb, and says there were guards at the tomb, presumably Roman soldiers, who trembled and became like dead men. Then the women meet Jesus in the garden and he tells them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee where he will meet them. There are no more appearances in Jerusalem, contrary to John's gospel. In Matthew the disciples do go to Galilee where Jesus meets them on a mountain, though Matthew adds 'but some doubted' or 'wondered' (28: 17). There Jesus gives them the missionary commission to go and make disciples of all nations. Matthew on the other hand does not have an ascension story.

John, writing later, has extensive appearances in both Jerusalem and Galilee, over a period of forty days, but again no ascension story.

So when we bring the different gospel narratives together there are mysteries which it is impossible to ignore. Their versions cannot all be right. They represent different traditions. In Mark, the earliest, there is the enigmatic ending and no appearances. Then there is the major contradiction between Matthew and Luke in that Matthew has appearances in both Jerusalem and in Galilee spread at least over some days or weeks, traditionally forty days, whereas Luke has appearances only in and around Jerusalem, and all within a matter of hours. There is the puzzle that in Luke and John the first people to see the risen Jesus do not recognise him. And there is the even more mysterious feature of the risen Jesus being able to appear and disappear at will.

There is one other item in Matthew's Gospel which on the one hand supports the bodily resurrection tradition and yet on the other hand raises a question about it. This is Matthew 27: 52-3, which tells us that 'many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep [died] were raised, and coming out of their tombs after his [Jesus'] resurrection they went into the

holy city [Jerusalem] and appeared to many'. This reminds us that for Jews of that time resurrection meant bodily resurrection. So for them this meant that if Jesus was said to have been raised from the dead this must mean that his body came out of the tomb. But on the other hand, it also fits the alternative New Testament tradition of visions only. For if the original proclamation of the disciples was that Jesus had appeared to them, meaning that they had seen visions of him, and if this was enough for them, their proclamation of the risen Lord would almost inevitably as time went on have come to be understood to mean that they had seen his resurrected body, and the Gospels one and two generations after the event would be likely to have taken this form.

The significance for us today of this story of many of the dead coming out of their graves and walking into Jerusalem and being seen by many is that it shows us what Matthew's readers in the 80's could be expected to accept without question. For in the ancient world physical miracle stories were common and were not received, as they are today, with probing questions. And yet such an event is historically extremely improbable. Such an extraordinary event would surely have found its place in the Roman records of the time. But Josephus and Tacitus, who do mention the fact that there was a teacher called Jesus and that he was executed by the Romans, make no mention of stories either about his resurrection or about this mass resurrection of people coming out of their graves and being publicly seen in Jerusalem. But it is hard to see how the Roman authorities in Jerusalem could fail to have been aware of such a startling mass phenomenon, and how it could fail to be recorded as an extraordinary historical event. Imagine a lot of people rising from their tombs in Lodge Hill cemetery and walking down Bristol Road into the town centre and being seen by many!



Further, the story of the empty tomb, present in all four gospels, seems to have been a late addition to the tradition. It was not part of the original message that Paul received from the apostles, and does not seem to have been known by Paul. It is not mentioned in any of his letters, and first appears in Mark's gospel around AD 70. It seems to many scholars to be a dubious element in the Gospels.

So far we have been talking mainly about the Gospels. But the earliest reference to the resurrection is not in any of them but in Paul, in I Co. 15:4, dated in the early 50s. This is particularly significant because Paul is also the only person from whom we have a first-hand account of an encounter with the risen Christ - or at least the author of Acts' account of Paul's account. We will come to that in a moment. But in I Cor. Paul reminds his readers of the gospel that he received from the apostles after his conversion in the year 33 or 34 - it being believed today that the crucifixion occurred in AD30. The message was that 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James [Jesus's brother], then to all the apostles'. Last of all, Paul adds, as to one untimely born, he appeared to him also. The big question is whether his being raised and appearing means, in this original message, that he was raised bodily, the physical body coming out of the tomb, or does it consist in Peter and some of the others having visions of him. If we read the much later gospel stories into Paul's earlier words, as we customarily do, it means a physical resurrection, but if not, it is consistent with both the bodily and the visions tradition.

A comment on Paul's reference to the risen Lord appearing to more than five hundred of the brethren at once - why, incidentally, no women, or is 'brethren' perhaps meant inclusively? We would expect most of any five hundred people to be still alive only two or three years later. So most probably that was not part of the original message that Paul received but something that had become part of the tradition during the nearly twenty years before Paul was writing.

Paul's own account of his encounter with the risen Lord is described first in Acts 9: 1-9 and then in his speeches reported in Acts. In Acts 22: 6-9 Paul says, 'As I made my journey and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And I answered, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said to me, "I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting". Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me'. In other words, in this account, it was an inner voice. On the other hand, in the passage in chapter 9 the others hear the voice but see nothing. And later, in Acts 26: 13-16, where Paul is speaking to king Agrippa, Paul repeats his story, saying that on his way to Damascus 'At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining round me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It hurts you to kick against the goads". So here again his companions see the light but do not hear the voice. Here the voice speaks for much longer than in the other account, Jesus going on to commission Paul as his apostles to the gentiles.

Now Paul (according to Luke, the author of Acts) reports this experience as the risen Lord appearing to him. You remember that in his listing of Jesus' appearances he

includes this. 'Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me' (I Cor. 15:8). This was of vital importance to Paul because it was this that made him an apostle. He refers to himself as an apostle in his letters (for example, Gal. 1:1) and says (Galatians 1: 16) that God 'was pleased reveal his Son to me'. In I Cor. 9:1 he asks, 'Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?' - using the same Greek verb, *opthe* for this as for the other apostles' seeing the Lord. However the scholars are widely agreed that this word, followed by the dative, is better translated as 'appeared to' or 'was seen by'. In other words, it is compatible with visions rather than a physical presence.

So in this overwhelming experience on the Damascus road Paul saw a bright light, received a vision of Jesus, and heard a voice. There was no physical presence of Jesus, not only because Paul does not speak of one but also because if there had been, those who were with him would also have seen it. He had a vision of Jesus and heard an inner voice. And it seems very reasonable to treat Paul's experience as our clue to the earlier experience of the first apostles. If so, they had visions of the risen Lord, but no bodily presence was involved.

Indeed the idea that Jesus' resurrection was a physical event would be incompatible, for Paul, with his belief that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God' (I Cor. 15: 50), and his belief that the resurrection of the faithful will not be in their physical body but a spiritual body. He says, 'It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body' (I Cor. 15: 44). If this was what Paul believed, he may well have thought that what he saw in his vision was the spiritual body of Jesus.

There is however a possible difficulty in the visions tradition. It is natural that several people at once would see a physical presence, but could they all have the same vision at the same time - all the disciples at once, and the five hundred? It is not uncommon for an individual to have

a fleeting vision of a recently dead loved one. (I have had such a vision myself). But what about collective visions of the dead? It may be relevant that the annals of parapsychology do record a number of cases of collectively perceived apparitions . But the much stronger likelihood is that the stories of all the apostles together, and the five hundred, seeing the risen Jesus simultaneously are later creative developments within the developing tradition. I pointed out earlier that the five hundred cannot have been part of the original message that Paul received from the apostles. So this is another unresolved question.

So we are left with a lot of questions. Whether we opt for the bodily or the visions interpretation of the complex biblical material taken as a whole, we are have to accept what are probably insoluble problems.

Finally, what does Easter mean to me - which is the title of this series? Well, what it means to me has nothing to do with all these unresolved puzzles and conflicting indications in the texts! If nevertheless you ask me, what among all of this incompatible and often conflicting material I feel sure of, I would have to say that I feel sure that there must have been visions of Jesus after his death. I do not feel at all sure that there was a physical body. But my faith in Jesus as lord does not depend on a balancing of the sort of considerations I have been outlining; and I would not want to have a faith that was precariously balanced on such conflicting indications. Nor however would I want to have a faith which ignored them. I know of course that many are happy to set all that aside, and affirm a simple straightforward belief that Jesus rose bodily from the grave, and I have no quarrel with them, although I cannot in honesty share their certainty.

So for me Easter is a joyful symbol of a central element of the gospel, God's gift of renewal, of ever new beginnings, of rebirth, of life transcending death. That it comes at

spring time when nature is renewing itself is a happy coincidence. But Easter is our Christian symbol of hope, of the ongoing fact of new life, of freedom from the grip of the past, of openness to the future, to new possibilities, ultimately openness to the Kingdom of God and an intimation of life beyond death.

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