

What can we believe about Jesus?

The third of a four part series, which began with the stories of Jesus' birth and his public ministry, now continues with the resurrection and will then conclude reflecting on the Christ of Faith.

The resurrection

What about the resurrection?

For his followers, Jesus' death must have been a disaster and what seems to have changed them was the resurrection. But what actually happened to bring about that belief?

The New Testament says two things. First, the tomb was empty and second, the appearances confirmed he had indeed conquered death. Seeing these two assertions as historically accurate has been the faith of many Christian people since the very earliest days including a former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, who says it was only the combination of these two as actual historical facts that could account for the subsequent establishment and growth of the church.

But there has been great debate amongst biblical scholars about both, and there are some genuine questions raised by a careful examination of the New Testament itself, questions I have always believed the church should be open about, and which should not be simply confined to discussion in some academic closet.

Take the tradition of the empty tomb. The earliest evidence comes from Paul's letters, written some years before the gospels were written. In particular Paul was the only actual observer of the risen Christ whose own account appears in the New Testament itself. In 1 Corinthians he says that Jesus died and was buried, and then gives a list of various people to whom Christ appeared, but he says nothing about the nature of those appearances and when he describes the one to him it is surprisingly brief: 'Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.' In his letter to the Galatians it is even briefer: God 'was pleased to reveal his Son to me'. But even though in the Corinthian passage he is arguing for the resurrection, he says nothing about the tomb being found empty.

Some scholars have thought that silence so significant that they have concluded the tradition of the empty tomb was not something that Paul knew, and that it was probably a later invention by the early church. This was not simply an expression of modern radicalism; the 1938 Doctrine Commission Report chaired by Archbishop William Temple noted that some of their members believed 'the connection made in the NT between the emptiness of the tomb and the appearances of the Risen Lord belong rather to the sphere of religious symbolism

than to that of historical fact.' Other theologians and biblical scholars, including the Roman Catholic theologian Hans K ung, share

such historical scepticism. Indeed some scholars even doubt whether the whole tradition of a particular identifiable tomb was historical, and that Jesus' body may have been thrown into a common burial pit with other criminals. The traditional site of Jesus' tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was only identified as such in the C4th.

That sort of debate applies to the second element in the resurrection, the appearances. When we turn to the gospels each has a rather different account. The vast majority of biblical scholars believe the last chapter of the first gospel to be written, Mark, ends at verse 8, with the women fleeing from the tomb with trembling and astonishment, and with no original account of any resurrection appearance. Matthew and Luke have rather different pictures. Matthew has Jesus appear to the women fleeing from the tomb, asking them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee, and then Jesus appears to the disciples on the mountain in Galilee. But in Matthew the accounts are brief, only twenty verses in all.

Luke's gospel has nothing about any appearance by Christ near the tomb, but according to Luke it was angels who gave the women the message that Jesus had risen. Luke then has accounts that appear only in his gospel; the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the disciples recounting that Jesus had appeared to Peter, and then Jesus appearing to all the disciples and departing from them at Bethany, near Jerusalem. Luke elaborates that story in the Acts of the Apostles with his account of the Ascension. In contrast to Matthew, Luke says nothing about any appearances in Galilee: all the appearances in his gospel happen in or near Jerusalem.

It is only when we get to John's Gospel, which many scholars believe was a much later document, that we get the more detailed stories with which we are familiar: Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene by the tomb, then to most of the disciples in Jerusalem, then to Thomas a week later, and then, in the final chapter, the various appearances in Galilee.

These very different accounts are problematic. It is difficult to square the appearances that Paul identifies to the Corinthians with the various accounts that occur in the different Gospels. The variety of the stories of appearances in the Gospels,



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with those Gospels that are widely believed to be later having more accounts of appearances than the earlier ones, also makes the objective reader wonder how much of these stories is actual history and how much is later reflections of the Gospel writers seeking to strengthen the belief of their readers in the resurrection. It is also notable that it is only in the later books, Matthew, Luke and John, written forty or more years after the described events, that the resurrection body of Jesus appears to be of such a sort that he can be physically handled and is observed eating; Paul's account of the resurrection contains nothing like that.

There is also a problem of the consistency of the gospels. If one believes, for example, that John's stories are accurate, and that the appearance to Thomas in the presence of the disciples a week after the first Easter was historically the case, there is the extraordinary problem that neither Matthew nor Luke mentions it. Why? Did they not know of it, or did they not think it important? Either explanation seems very remarkable, which is no doubt one of the reasons why a number of NT scholars doubt that story's historical accuracy as opposed to its theological value.

If one believes, as I do, that some sort of appearances might well have happened, what sort of appearances were they? Were they ones that, if cameras had existed at the time, would have been caught on film, or were they appearances given only to those who had the eyes of faith? If the latter, as seems at least possible from the limited evidence we have, then in what sense can we say they were real objective appearances rather than subjective visions, like the visions people do sometimes have of those who have died who were very important for them? Given the length of time between the events and their being written down in the Gospels, and then the passage of time until now, it seems very unlikely that we shall ever know for certain the answer to such speculation.

Those are the sorts of questions that lie behind the debates of NT scholars, and the important point is that there are serious Christian men and women on all sides of the argument. It is not a simple question of swallowing the lot or leaving it. But perhaps even more important is the fact that today a huge number of people belong to the worldwide Christian Church and find Jesus to be an inspiration that provides for them a guide on how to live. Whatever it was that caused resurrection belief in the first place, for someone who held no official position and died an ignominious death that must indeed be resurrection.



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Corona Virus

In these desperate, lonely days
we can find strength in our faith.

Maybe the name for this troublesome virus
was chosen for its crown like appearance
or its similarity to the 'corona' of light
surrounding the sun during an eclipse.

Corona suggests undefeatable power,
awesomeness.

Beware!

But, how different from that other crown –
of thorns, never to be forgotten
as we revisit the Good Friday stories.

Thankfully, Good Friday is followed by Easter Day.

We can celebrate the deep truth
Jesus revealed to powerful Pilate.

'My kingdom is not of this world',

or as St. Paul wrote,

'God's apparent weakness
is stronger than human strength'.

Despite this troublesome virus,

despite our isolation

we can and will still celebrate Easter,

assured that there is nothing

which can exterminate God

who will give us the strength to cope,

come what may both in this earthly life

and in that mystery

which we trust lies beyond bodily death.

Halleluiah indeed!

Ros Murphy

June 2020 | 9