

## 5 The Risen Jesus

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‘God raised Jesus from the dead.’ Our knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth and his impact on history depends almost uniquely on his followers’ conviction about an event after his execution: inexplicably and yet unmistakably, Jesus was experienced as visibly present and alive in personal encounters with his disciples soon after his death and burial. Without that conviction, affirmed explicitly by virtually all extant early Christian sources and contested by none, we would almost certainly know nothing about Jesus at all.

Within at most fifteen years of the crucifixion, the resurrection of Jesus was deeply embedded not just in the original Palestinian Jewish communities of his followers but in Paul’s new missionary outreach to the gentile world of Asia Minor and Greece (1 Thess 1:10; 4:14; Gal 1:1), based on a shared tradition inherited from Judean believers in the very first years of the Christian movement: Jesus died and was buried, but was ‘raised on the third day’ and then seen by Peter (Cephas), his inner circle of twelve disciples, a larger group of 500 followers, then by his brother James and by all the apostles together – and ultimately by Paul himself (1 Cor 15:3–8). Paul insists, in fact, that this reality is indispensable to the very possibility of Christian faith: ‘if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile’ (1 Cor 15:17, 19, 32).

Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), the last century’s most famous New Testament critic, fully recognized the logical force of that argument as much as he found it distastefully ‘dangerous’ – *fatal*, indeed. In his view, Paul’s ‘attempt to make the resurrection of Jesus credible as an objective historical fact’ shows he failed to understand what Bultmann understood: no historical fact could possibly bear in any way on a resurrection from the dead (Bultmann 1948, 48; trans. Bultmann 1953, 39).

By the turn of the present century, scholarly literature on the ‘historical Jesus’ had comfortably embraced a studied neglect of his resurrection. Some easily dismissed its relevance on the strength of their (historically implausible) conviction that Jesus’s Jewish cadaver

must have been tossed into a public lime-pit or devoured by birds and stray dogs (so, e.g., Crossan 1994, 127, 154). But even the more methodologically prudent and circumspect ‘historical Jesus’ questers tended to sideline or avoid the resurrection – typically on the pretext that it is reducible to a question of ‘faith’ or of ‘theology’, about which no self-respecting ‘historian’ could possibly have anything to say (e.g. Meier 1991–2016, 1:13).

To be sure, quite what ‘resurrection’ might mean is never clearly defined in our early sources, with interpretations varying appreciably. And unlike some later, noncanonical accounts like the Gospel of Peter, the New Testament writings do not attempt to narrate or describe this event itself.

‘History’ and ‘myth’, truth and rhetoric, experience and interpretation all converge in any serious attempt to make sense of the early Christians’ extraordinary, unprecedented, and complex claim about Jesus. It does not lend itself to one-dimensional explanations, whether in terms of ‘miracle’, ‘myth’, ‘metaphor’, or for that matter of ‘history’. Such category mistakes are also not helped by slam-dunk rationalism of either the apologetic or the sceptical variety: nuanced historical inquiry simply cannot deliver straightforward ‘evidence’, either ‘that God raised Jesus from the dead’ or ‘that God did no such thing’ (Allison 2021, 3).

Resurrections are not meaningfully subject to scholarly judgements about causes and effects, let alone about historical probabilities. It may (Allison 2021) or may not be useful to contextualize the gospel accounts in relation to historic or contemporary experiences of the paranormal. For all the mystery and complexity of that alleged third day after the crucifixion, however, it is a matter of historical record that *something* happened – something decisive and far-reaching in the experience of the first Christians which shaped the course of world history to an extent unlike any event before or since. This footprint of Jesus is thus open to historical inquiry and of the utmost importance for any historical understanding (cf. Wright 2003, 1–31).

Only outcomes ultimately allow the mass of brute facts to become interpretable as history: only they make it possible to distinguish the salient from the trivial. As a mere humanitarian sage and cultural dissident, Jesus would have remained insignificant, scarcely mentioned or more likely ignored by contemporary historians (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.63–64; 20.200) – and unlikely ever to be available as a meaningful subject of historical interest. Absent the unexpected resurrection of Jesus, even his disciples could only lament failed messianic hopes (Luke 24:21); faced with the event, they went on to attest nothing less

than 'a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (1 Pet 1:3). However one proceeds in the end to interpret the historical or theological significance of this claim and its underlying experiences, it stands at the very heart of any properly 'historical' assessment of Jesus of Nazareth.

### COMPLEX SOURCES

Given their evident importance to authors and audiences alike, the Easter stories are marked by a striking degree of diversity and tension. The four gospels embed their cognate affirmation in brief narrative accounts that do agree on a few key features: after his public execution on a Roman cross, Jesus is buried in the tomb of the Sanhedrin member Joseph of Arimathea. Two days later (counting inclusively: 'on the third day' or 'after three days'), this evidently identifiable tomb is found empty by women disciples including Mary Magdalene. Quite what happens then, however, appears a jumble of excited claims and counter-claims in each of the four gospels, which seems impossible to reduce to an orderly narrative.

#### Mark

Mark's is the briefest and most primitive form of the narrative, particularly in its earliest extant form (16:1–8). Mary Magdalene and two others find the tomb open and come across only 'a young man in a white robe', who asks them to tell the disciples that Jesus has been raised and will meet them in Galilee. The earliest text ends abruptly with the women saying 'nothing to anyone' and fleeing in fear (16:8); Mark's Greek syntax famously reinforces that abruptness by the striking staccato of concluding on the particle *gar* ('for'). Although Mark consistently anticipates both the resurrection of Jesus and the (angelic) instruction to meet him in Galilee (8:31; 9:9, 31; 10:34; 14:28), no such encounter is narrated in the earliest form of his text (unlike in the early second-century appendix at 16:9–20).

Twentieth-century commentators liked to speculate about this problem by invoking either a supposedly lost original ending of the Gospel or, conversely, Mark's generation of existential drama by projecting the unfulfilled angelic promise of encounter into the reader's present. And yet, the very insistence of those predictions presupposes their fulfilment: the narrative would instantly collapse if, as some scholars have argued, readers either knew or suspected that the promised encounter of 16:8 had never transpired.

Even a Markan text ending at 16:8 (which as such is not attested prior to the fourth century) implies a reader who already knows a narrative resembling that of Matthew 28 – or for that matter of Mark 16:9–20, composed a generation later, which became the most successful and ultimately canonical ending of this gospel. Drawing loosely on accounts in the other canonical gospels, it supplies resurrection appearances first to Mary Magdalene (who *does* inform the disciples), then to two disciples ‘walking into the country’, and finally before his ascension to ‘the Eleven’ (i.e. minus Judas Iscariot) ‘as they were having dinner’.

### Matthew

Matthew’s own, still rather economic account is the New Testament text that comes closest to narrating the resurrection itself (28:2–3): an angel descends from heaven in the midst of an earthquake to roll back the stone and sit on it. On seeing the empty tomb and being instructed to inform the disciples as in Mark, the two Marys encounter Jesus in person before going on to tell the disciples ‘with fear and great joy’ (28:8) – thus becoming ‘apostles of the apostles’, as later Christian writers put it (e.g. Jerome *Comm. Soph.* preface). Following a brief apologetic interlude on the Jewish chief priests bribing the Roman guard at the tomb to remain silent (28:11–15), the risen Jesus does in fact appear to the eleven remaining disciples on a mountain in Galilee to commission them and promise his continuing presence.

### Luke

The Third Evangelist provides the fullest and most concrete narrative of encounters with the risen Jesus exclusively in and around Jerusalem, mapped explicitly onto Jesus’s messianic fulfilment of Scripture. Once again it is his female Galilean followers who become the ‘apostles of the apostles’, even though their Easter witness is at first dismissed by men (24:11). Subsequent experiences involve Peter (24:12, 24), Cleopas and another disciple on the way to Emmaus (24:13–33), and finally ‘the Eleven’ and their friends, with whom Jesus eats and with whom he goes to the Mount of Olives before ‘he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven’ (24:51).

### Acts

Luke’s second volume interprets and complements his earlier account. Here, the period of Jesus’s pre-ascension appearances presents ‘many convincing proofs’ of his resurrection during a period of not one but forty days (1:3), again explicitly confined to Jerusalem. Developing

what is elsewhere described as Jesus's exaltation to heaven, the ascension becomes for Luke an event envisaged in strikingly spatial terms: Jesus is 'lifted up' bodily in front of his disciples, then taken out of their sight by a cloud (1:9). The inner circle of twelve apostles and witnesses of the resurrection is restored with the selection of Matthias (1:21–26). While for Luke the ascension pauses all further earthly encounters with the risen Christ until his return (1:11), Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road is described three times in terms of an individually granted 'heavenly vision' (26:19; cf. 9:3–7; 22:6–10; 26:12–18). One subsequent ecstatic vision in the Temple grants Paul to hear and 'see Jesus' (22:18).

### John

The Fourth Gospel has Peter and the Beloved Disciple racing to the tomb at Mary Magdalene's news and finding in it only the folded gravecloths – enough for the Beloved Disciple to 'see and believe' (20:8). Mary meanwhile, lingering by the tomb, meets the risen Jesus whom she initially mistakes for a gardener and who forbids her to touch him (20:17). Appearing later through closed doors to ten of the disciples to commission and empower them with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returns a week later to overcome the doubts of the previously absent Thomas, who unlike Mary is invited to touch his wounded side. An additional resurrection appearance at the Sea of Galilee involves a miraculous catch of fish and a meal, during which Jesus rehabilitates Simon Peter and appoints him as pastor of his flock (21:1–23).

### Paul

Part of Paul's own formative instruction which he then transmitted to new believers at Corinth, our earliest attested sequence (1 Cor 15:3–7) makes no explicit mention of the tomb or of women as the first to discover it. It features appearances to Cephas (i.e. Peter) and 'the Twelve' (i.e. presumably including Matthias) but uniquely also to James, to 'five hundred' believers at once, to 'all the apostles' – and ultimately to Paul himself: Paul 'saw' Jesus as no one after him did (1 Cor 9:1; 'last of all', 15:8) and received a distinctive apostolic 'revelation' of Jesus (Gal. 1:16).

## MAKING SENSE OF CONFLICTING TRADITIONS

These and similar considerations have seemed to many critics to subvert the credibility of the sources in a jumble of contradictions about such matters as the times and locations of the appearances, the

named individuals involved, and the accessibility of Jesus in the body or form in which he appears. Attempts to integrate and harmonize a single narrative have certainly not been lacking, but none has gained widespread acceptance. Sceptical interpreters through the ages have assured each other that the phenomena are reducible to individual and group hallucinations or visions, suggesting either that the earliest tradition had no knowledge of an empty (if indeed any) tomb or else that empty tombs were of course hardly out of the ordinary in antiquity. On this account, once tomb and appearance stories had begun to accumulate, each new feature was developed in response to the immediate apologetic and pastoral needs of the evangelist's respective community.

Such reductionist 'nothing but' accounts may flatter scholarly prejudice but rarely do justice to historical realities. For Paul, for example, the argument of 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 explicitly reproduces as authoritative a catechesis received from apostolic communities in Judaea, long before his arrival in Corinth in the year 50/51. This, however, is to endorse his dependence on a normative tradition that evidently trumps his preferred declaration of an apostolic pedigree directly authorized and at least equivalent to that of the Jerusalem apostles (e.g. Gal 1:11–19, 2:1–10; 1 Cor 3:22–4:1; 2 Cor 11:5, 22–23). Unlike all four of the evangelists, Paul does not explicitly mention an empty tomb. And yet, to affirm it alongside a resurrection would for a Jew be tautologous: the fact that the body of Jesus was 'buried' leaves no room for any form of it to remain in the tomb (cf. Wright 2003, 321). Throughout the chapter, it is a non-negotiable pillar of Paul's interpretation that resurrection life is fundamentally 'bodily' (15:35–58).

The New Testament documents do assert a consensus on the truth and significance of the resurrection witness (note 1 Cor 15:11). The continuing narrative mayhem of the various accounts, even four or five decades after the event, may itself bear eloquent testimony to the force of this consensus. 'Calculated deception should have produced greater unanimity. Instead, there seem to have been competitors: "I saw him first!" "No! I did!"' (Sanders 1993, 280). The surprising but undeniable convergence of these competing convictions in the Easter affirmations suggests a generative event of irreducibly colossal magnitude (cf. Hoskyns and Davey 1981, 282–84). A similar dynamic may be at work in the question of whether it was Peter (1 Cor 15:5) or rather, as in all four gospels, Mary Magdalene and the women disciples who first witnessed the resurrection and thus became 'apostles of the apostles'.

## EVIDENCE AND TESTIMONY

The Easter narratives point to an event in historical time and space and yet which is not straightforwardly ordered and sequenced within historical time and space. This intrinsic polyvalence requires further comment. Luke, John, and Paul are particularly committed to the factual nature of the resurrection, established by ‘convincing proofs’ (so Acts 1:4). At no point, however, do these early Christian sources treat the resurrection witness as ‘evidence that demands a verdict’ – or even in the positive conviction that ‘no other explanation could or would do’ to explain an empty tomb and appearances (Wright 2003, 717).

Even on a comprehensively sympathetic reading, the ‘facts’ are far from self-interpreting. We know of many empty first-century tombs, other messiahs who died a violent death, and many crucified men (some of whose skeletons, like Yohanan at Jerusalem’s Giv’at ha-Mivtar, have turned up with a nail still stuck through their ankles). Ancient tomb robbery was a thriving industry; and as both Matthew (28:13) and John (20:13) already knew, an empty tomb can be interpreted in a variety of other ways – not all of them self-evidently absurd.

None of the New Testament authors claim to be eyewitnesses. The risen Jesus repeatedly proves difficult or ambiguous to identify, even for close followers (Matt 28:17; Luke 24:16; John 20:14–15, 21:4); Mark’s longer ending even speaks of him appearing ‘in another form’ (16:12). As a result, any synoptic reading of the different sources may leave us with considerable bewilderment about who saw what, where, when, and how. The Easter encounters repeatedly occasion both faith and doubt even in the very people who saw the risen Jesus and worshipped him (e.g. Matt 28:17, ‘but they hesitated’ (my translation)).

Documentary archives and public records might well certify a crucifixion but could not do so for a resurrection. Although the firm conviction of the early Christians certainly claims to be factual, it depends not on forensic ‘evidence’ but on a reliable tradition authenticated by apostolic eyewitness. As the Peter of Acts puts it, God granted Jesus to appear ‘not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead’ (10:41). It is the apostles, and only they, who are able and indeed ‘commanded’ to serve as guarantors of the resurrection tradition (10:42; cf. Acts 1:22, 25; 1 Cor 9:1; John 19:35; 21:24; 1 John 1:1–3).

What is ‘doubting’ (*apistos*) about the Fourth Gospel’s Thomas is not his desire for facts but his emphatic refusal to trust the apostolic testimony: ‘unless [I see and touch him], I will not believe’ (John 20:25, 27, 29).

(Even then, of course, he does not abandon the community of faith – and so is present to encounter Jesus the second time round.)

The apostolic writers, then, did not attempt to mount some sort of watertight ‘proof’ of the resurrection. But they evidently did find themselves confronted with a series of diversely experienced encounters that required interpretation and appropriation in profoundly theological terms. Their conclusions were reached not on the basis of a rationally unassailable or psychologically comfortable case (to James and Paul, at least, it manifestly was not) but because the Jesus they encountered was emphatically alive and present calling and committing them to his mission. As commentators have noted since antiquity, the resurrection encounters almost invariably have a converting and energizing effect on those who were until that point doubtful, demoralized, or opposed, and would have remained so without them (e.g. Chrysostom *Hom. 1 Cor.* 4.4 on 1:25, PG 61:36; cf. further Atkins 2019).

This reality of a transformative encounter with the present Jesus best accounts for the talk of ‘resurrection’. The New Testament resurrection accounts are not literary constructs but rather ‘derive ultimately from people’s real experiences, however curious’ (Allison 2021, 345). Getting to grips with such inexplicable and yet undeniable events would inevitably distend the available language and categories of explanation to breaking point.

### THE LANGUAGE OF ‘RESURRECTION’

But why would the early witnesses resort to the rather distinctive Jewish language of ‘resurrection’ in describing the Easter experiences? The walking dead getting up from their coffins were, after all, an uncommon but repeatedly attested phenomenon until the advent of modern medicine. Jesus, too, was credited with returning newly dead people to life at Capernaum, Nain, and Bethany (Mark 5:35–41 *parr.*; Luke 7:11–16; John 11:38–44). Even the gospels report some of his Jewish contemporaries believing that prophets recent or ancient might be ‘raised from the dead’ and walk among the living (Mark 6:14–16; 8:28; 9:12 *parr.*; cf., e.g., 2 Macc 15:13–16; b. *B. Meš.* 59b). Moses and Elijah were believed to have been assumed bodily to heaven rather than buried; both attended later Jewish teachers from Rabbi Akiva in the second century to Shabbetai Tzvi in the seventeenth. Greco-Roman stories, too, are familiar with the motifs of finding unexpectedly empty tombs whose occupants subsequently reappear alive and well (e.g. Chariton’s probably second-century novel *Chaireas and Callirhoë*, bk. 3). Various historical heroes posthumously

appeared to their followers, underwent apotheosis, and even became the subjects of new and thriving cults (examples range from Roman emperors to philosophical figures like Apollonius of Tyana).

Beginning no later than the second century, Celsus and other critics of Christianity began to make the most of such apparent analogies (e.g. Origen, *C. Cels.* 2.55–58). Regardless of their polemical intent or critical merit, several of these parallels clearly document the extent to which popular Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural typologies would render intelligible the reception as well as the propagation of a resurrected and ascended Jesus.

That said, none of these cases concerns someone publicly crucified as a common criminal. More importantly, none parallels the specifically Jewish apocalyptic connotation of the claim that the Easter events mark the ‘resurrection’ as God’s victory at the beginning of a new creation – an idea consonant with Jewish interpretation of prophetic books like Isaiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, and Daniel (cf. further Levenson 2006). In both Judaism and Hellenism, the mere apparition or exaltation of a dead hero was perfectly conceivable without entailing either a bodily resurrection or the idea that God had thereby inaugurated the life of the world to come.

Precisely the assurance of resurrection, however, is in the New Testament taken to authenticate Jesus as the messianic Son of David (Acts 2:31–36; 13:34–37; Rom 1:3–4; 2 Tim 2:8; Rev 22:16): God has raised, exalted, and established him as the Son of God empowered by the Spirit (e.g. Rom 1:4; Phil 2:19–10; Matt 28:18). The raising of Jesus functions as the onset, the analogous ‘firstfruits’, of the comprehensive, general resurrection (1 Cor 15:20, 23; cf., e.g., Matt 27:52–53; Rev 1:5). And thus the perishable, ‘natural’ (*psychikon*) body of this world is here contrasted with the immortal, ‘spiritual’ (*pneumatikon*) one (15:42, 44) of the world to come. To belong to this risen Lord is to share in ‘incredible and glorious joy’ (1 Pet 1:8; cf. Luke 24:52; John 20:20), expectantly looking to participate in ‘the power of his resurrection’ (Phil 3:10–11). It was this decisiveness of the Easter events that understandably made their interpretation so highly charged: ‘We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him’ (Rom 6:9).

If nothing else, such hyperbolic theological language shows that the assertion of Jesus’s resurrection does in fact depart in important respects from all known contemporary typologies for empty tombs, apparitions, and apotheoses. The ancients knew full well that a *ghost* ‘does not have flesh and bones’ (Luke 24:39) and does not eat or drink but that a

*resuscitated body* might easily have and do all those things. And yet, neither of these perfectly familiar and acceptable tropes is invoked by any of the diverse New Testament witnesses.

This intense cultural idiosyncrasy of the resurrection claim is well worth underlining: insofar as this is history, it is history with a heavy Palestinian Jewish accent. Matthew's Roman guards (27:62–66; 28:4), if they were indeed at the tomb and if they saw anything, would not and could not have described this in the apocalyptic language of 'resurrection' – be they adherents of the cult of the emperor, of Mithras, or even of Isis. Paul is later plausibly described as struggling to make himself understood by philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:18, 32), and Christianity's ancient intellectual critics returned to the supposed absurdity of this theme again and again (e.g. Celsus in Origen *C. Cels.* 5.14; 6.29). Neither, of course, would 'resurrection' be a natural point of reference for their supposed Sadducean paymasters, who are plausibly described as plotting to nip any populist hocus-pocus well and truly in the bud (Matt 27:62–66; 28:4, 11–15; cf. Acts 23:6–8).

In the context of first-century Pharisaic and apocalyptic Judaism, however, 'resurrection' was the only available terminology to name this otherwise unprecedented experience. Unparalleled events occasioned a unique language – in principle no less striking in the first century than in the twenty-first (cf. already Mark 9:10). For all its inalienable cultural idiosyncrasy, the angelic announcement that 'He is not here, for he has been raised' (Matt 28:6) encapsulates the only possible way in which Jewish followers of Jesus could explain the confusingly diverse and yet convergent experiences of both absence and presence that followed his crucifixion.

Had those experiences been either purely visionary or straightforwardly material in nature, Palestinian Judaism had plenty of narrative and conceptual devices to signal that fact, as other texts did. Certain Jewish visionary features do surface in the narratives and may indeed gain in poignancy from their Passover setting. But the plain sense of all the appearance accounts is nevertheless that the risen Jesus was encountered and seen, not 'visualized', as personally present.

Conventional categories, indeed, rapidly appear to founder on the reality that is being described, 'immanent' and 'transcendent' features often starkly clashing or juxtaposed. It is precisely Thomas's anatomically tactile Jesus who can be described as having entered, just a moment earlier, through locked doors (John 20:26)! Although evidently unanticipated by those who went on to embrace it, the only available category big enough to fit the reality turned out to be the

eschatological affirmation of resurrection at the hands of the living God of Israel: 'This Jesus God raised up' (Acts 2:32).

The Christian language of 'resurrection' finds its origin in the circumstances of a specific time, place, and culture: those of first-century Jerusalem. It was Jerusalem's religious conflicts, political machinations, and colonial occupation which made Jesus a victim of juridical persecution as well as Roman torture and crucifixion. And it was in this city that he was first seen as risen from the dead – at once Jerusalem's victim and the vanquisher of Jerusalem's oppression (cf. Williams 1982, 7–28).

### HISTORY AND A RESURRECTED JESUS

We return, then, to the problem with which we began. There are good reasons to interpret the resurrection as a theological affirmation rooted in historical fact – at a minimum, in the discovery of an empty tomb followed by variously described encounters with its occupant. Regardless of the precise view one may take on the phenomenology of this foundational event, its historicity was quite evidently the logical and psychological precondition for any sort of continued 'Christian' existence. Without it, our sources would be silent: there could have been no abiding interest in either Jesus of Nazareth or the exalted Christ of faith. On this point the history of Christianity firmly holds together the bodily identity of Jesus of Nazareth with that of the risen and ascended Christ.

This point casts serious doubt on the romanticism of attempts, from Ernest Renan's in 1863 to the present day, to salvage something noble and admirable out of the plundered remains of an unresurrected Jesus. In that regard, the Pauline reasoning of 1 Corinthians entails a remarkably contemporary and sober realism: no resurrection, no Jesus.

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.... If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'. (1 Cor 15:17–19, 32)

Far from being able to set aside a matter outside his or her purview, then, the conscientious historian of Jesus – precisely qua historian – is necessarily entangled in a matter of historical and more than historical consequence.

This entanglement is further reinforced by the extent to which a doctrine of resurrection appears to have been an important component

of Jesus of Nazareth's own eschatology, rooted in his interpretation of Scripture, a connection that is not lost on the evangelists themselves. All four of them explicitly relate the meaning of the resurrection to the teachings of Jesus. This is perhaps most powerfully evident in Jesus's so-called passion predictions, which in virtually every case include an explicit reference to resurrection (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:34 *parr.*; cf. also Mark 9:9; 12:10–11; 13:26; 14:25, 28; Matt 12:40, 27:63; Luke 24:6–7, 46; John 2:20–22; 11:25).

Although at one time fashionably dismissed as late fabrications for the reassurance of doubting Christian minds, their pattern of righteous suffering and vindication is in contemporary scholarship more commonly linked to an ancient and well-documented tradition of Second Temple Judaism grounded in texts like Genesis 22, Job, Jonah, the righteous servant in Isaiah 53, the vindicated Son of Man in Daniel 7, the murdered firstborn of the house of David in Zechariah 12:10–13:1, and Psalms like 22, 69, and 118. Echoed widely throughout the gospels and in Jewish sources (e.g. Wisd 2; 2 Macc 6–7; 4 Macc 6, 17; 4Q225; cf. *b. Ber.* 56b; *b. Sukk.* 52a; *Pirque R. El.* 31; cf. *Yal.* 575, 581 on Zech), this Jewish tradition evokes a pattern of the innocent sufferer's trust in God's faithfulness finding approval and assurance of ultimate vindication – not just for himself but for all his people. Even the well-attested but much-queried trope that such vindication was to take place 'on the third day according to the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3; Mark 8:31; 10:34 etc.) may well find its basis in reflection on texts like Hosea 6:2, which the Targum explicitly applies to the general resurrection (cf. also Matt 12:40 with Jonah 1:17 [=2:1 MT/LXX]).

Another example of Jesus of Nazareth's concern for the resurrection is his refutation of the sceptical Sadducees, in good Pharisaic fashion demonstrating the resurrection on the basis of the Torah (cf. *m. Sanh.* 10.1). Here, interestingly, the state of the resurrected is said to be 'like angels in heaven' (Mark 12:25). Although we should not perhaps overinterpret the implied phenomenology of his dig at apparently angel-denying opponents (Acts 23:8), Jesus's statement may bear out the New Testament's repeated placement of his resurrection, ascension, and return in the company of angels.

We may add, finally, that the Last Supper tradition offers further confirmation of this link in Jesus's mind. He connects his present suffering 'for many' with his future resurrection most strikingly in the Nazirite vow he takes on the eve of his arrest: 'Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God' (Mark 14:25 *parr.*).

In other words, the apostolic Easter experiences actually converge with a recurrent theme in the ministry of Jesus himself, which makes the resurrection an important key to understanding the aspirations as well as the demise of the historical Jesus, in his own view and in that of his followers. Even before Easter, Jesus seems to have implied that his own violent death would need to be interpreted back to front, as it were. He cast his fate deliberately within the scriptural framework of suffering and vindication. In that context, his death at the hands of his enemies could only be understood in the light of what would happen – or fail to happen – afterwards.

Significantly, his followers continued to give dramatic expression to that correlation in their continued meal fellowship, meeting specifically ‘on the first day of the week’, the day of the resurrection, to commemorate Jesus’s Last Supper and death and to participate in his presence in bread and wine (see, e.g., Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Did. 14.1; 1 Cor 10:16; 11:23–27; Justin *1 Apol.* 65–67).

#### RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION, PRESENCE AND PAROUSIA

Whatever happened to the risen Jesus? Only Luke narrates a visible, space-time ascension of Jesus to heaven, as we saw. But in fact all the early witnesses imply only a limited period of appearances – even if some, perhaps to accommodate Paul, later extended this from Luke’s forty days to eighteen months (Irenaeus *Haer.* 1.3.2, 30.14; Apocryphon of James). And they consistently connect his resurrection with his exaltation to God’s heavenly glory and power.

The resurrection thus entails a Jesus who is alive as well as exalted, both here and not-here, present both to the world and to the majesty of God, in heaven yet near and coming. His presence is bodily, personal, and continuous with Jesus of Nazareth, though not now visible and tangible until his Parousia, his coming in glory: his resurrected bodily ascension to heaven underwrites his coming from heaven in that same resurrected body (Acts 1:11). Although raised from the dead, he still bears the scars of his sacrifice in the crucifixion – a point deployed apologetically in the gospels (Luke 24:39; John 20:25–28) but perhaps also christologically of the heavenly Lamb ‘standing as if it had been slaughtered’ (Rev 5:6) – his woundedness, it seems, is not eliminated but glorified (a perspective that has found an evocative but theologically challenging application to disability studies: e.g. Brock 2019; more critically, Moss 2019).

Although expressed quite diversely, a comparable striking bodily and spatial dialectic recurs across the range of early Christian writings. The end of the appearances and the present hiddenness of Jesus matter no less than his nearness and real presence in time and space.

That real presence in turn is multiply mediated through the Spirit of God. This mediation occurs 'sacramentally', above all in eucharistic remembrance of his death and in baptism 'into' his death and resurrection (a reality of new creation whose conception ranges from the believer's identifying with Christ's crucifixion for the intended purpose of participating in resurrection life, to a present incorporation into death, resurrection, and even exaltation with him: Rom 6:4, 8, 11; Phil 3:10–12; Col 3:1–4; Eph 2:5–6). Mediation of the risen Jesus's presence also occurs in his body that is the church (its mission and teaching, its service of the poor, its worship and fellowship and judgement) as well as in the body of his apostle, in Jesus's word and authority, and even in apostolic writings about him. Some believers are granted one or more direct encounters with a post-ascension vision or voice of Jesus – beginning with the apostle Paul himself. Far from an attempt to compensate for a Christology of absence, as is sometimes claimed, the ascension of the risen Jesus instead inaugurates 'the new, definitive, and insuppressible form of his presence ... working through the power of his Spirit' (Benedict XVI 2009).

#### MYTH OR METAPHOR?

This strikingly integrative function of the resurrection of Jesus is consistently echoed and appropriated in the New Testament and patristic writings. Paul knew the crucifixion to be 'a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Greeks' (1 Cor 1:23) – and without the resurrection, faith is therefore futile. Precisely because of it, however, the cross can and does assume the redemptive significance that apparently already begins to be envisaged for it in Jesus's own teaching (e.g. Mark 10:45; 14:22–24 and parallels). Even the earliest traditions already stress the resurrection's integral role in vindicating the purpose of his life and death, confirming him as Son of God 'with power' and validating the crucifixion 'for our sins' by being raised 'for our justification' (Rom 1:3–4; 4:25). Christians, like their critics, were well aware that Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection stand and fall together: without the latter, the former would remain a pointless moral void, a failure; there would be nothing of consequence for believers to believe (1 Cor 15:17–19, 32).

Whether or not one deems that early Christian reasoning persuasive, it is important to recognize it for what it is: an attempt to do interpretative justice to Jesus of Nazareth within the first-century world that he himself inhabited, and to identify the implications for his followers' life and faith. 'God raised Jesus from the dead' has consequences: 'what we can know historically about Christ's resurrection must not be abstracted from the question of what we can hope from it, and what we have to do in its name' (Moltmann 1996, 80).

The resurrection is indeed a kind of religious metaphor, as is sometimes rather too blithely asserted – but its function is quite the opposite of conventional religious metaphors. From Plato's Cave to C. S. Lewis's Narnia, such metaphors employ the literal and familiar to speak (one hopes truthfully) of an otherworldly reality. The New Testament witness to the resurrection of Jesus, by contrast, finds only an eschatological reality adequate to describe a historical one, and only transcendent language sufficient to capture a bodily event. Heaven is no longer a metaphor of earthly bliss, or the world to come a pleasant postscript to mortality. Instead, Easter claims a newly redeemed earthly reality as a metaphor of heaven and transforms mortal life into the vestibule of paradise. Along similar lines, the resurrection resembles a myth turned inside out: for the pagan apologist Sallustius, the genius of the ancient myths is that 'these things never happened, but always are' (*On the Gods and the World*, 1). By contrast, Christian writers like Justin, Clement, and Eusebius saw the myths and philosophies of antiquity as vaguely adumbrated hopes and truths that in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus came to real embodied fruition.

The resurrection inaugurates the defining historical, moral, and ecological reality that is the 'new creation' (O'Donovan 1994). The risen and ascended body of Jesus sanctifies and will transform the bodies of all who belong to him: he will turn their humiliation and 'bondage to decay' into the freedom of divine glory, in the process destroying death itself (Rom 8:21–3; Phil 3:21; 1 Cor 15:26). This cosmic reach of the New Testament's Easter message is dramatically captured in the classic Orthodox Easter icons: the risen Jesus, ascending to heaven, extends his hand to raise up the awaking dead.

'God raised Jesus from the dead' marks the liminal point at which the identity of Jesus is confirmed ('with power', as Romans 1: 4 puts it). It affirms not an earthly 'coming back to life' (resuscitation) but his bodily inauguration of the life of God's sovereign new creation of the world, being exalted in his human body as the pioneer of its heavenly and permanent redemption. For any narrowly self-styled 'historical

criticism' intent on bracketing it out, the resurrection must inevitably remain a historical reality that is both awkward and unsatisfactory. Had we no knowledge of it, study of Jesus would be neither interesting nor, given the concomitant absence of sources, remotely possible. Yet the resurrection is *historical* in the sense of being located at a moment in the past that has a before and after, which was experienced and attested by other historical human beings, and whose proximate and more distant effects are utterly instrumental to the course of history. And yet, it also constitutes a transcendent reality which 'inexorably changes the register' of the available experiential and linguistic range of analogy (Williams 1996, 91).

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