

✠ HE IS RISEN ✠

When men crucified Jesus, they thought that would be the last word. Even His disciples thought the same and went home, disconsolate and demoralised. It turned out, however, to be only the word before the last. God would have the last word, the Empty Tomb, and it spoke a great twofold message. It declared God's vindication of His disgraced Son; and it proclaimed, in the most unmistakeable terms, that behind the natural sequence of cause and effect there lies a living, loving and powerful Intelligence who can interrupt and even reverse the sequence at will.

Here again we move, not in the realm of philosophy, but in the realm of history, and specifically in the records of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. But before looking at these we should pause over another remarkable appearance: the Transfiguration. There are accounts of it in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36), but the standout account is the personal recollection of the Apostle Peter as recorded in 2 Peter 1:16-18. For him, the story was no fable. He was personally present, as were

James and John, and he saw with his own eyes the transformation in the appearance of the Lord as the glory of the divine, normally veiled by His lowly human condition, shone momentarily in His human form. Never had they seen such brightness, and never had they been more afraid or more disorientated. Not only had they *seen* something extraordinary. They had also *heard* something extraordinary: the voice of God speaking from the Majestic Glory and bearing unforgettable testimony to the honour and excellence of His Son. 'This,' said the Voice, 'is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' (Mark 9:7).

We are now separated from this moment by some two thousand years, but Peter wasn't. He was there: he knew what he had seen, and he knew what he had heard, and he was resolved to devote what was left of his life to ensuring that the church would never forget it (2 Pet. 1:15). So sure was he, and so certain, that he would eventually seal his witness with his life.

Here again is history testifying to the extraordinary, and pointing to a glory which was there before ever there was a world; not only so, but a glory which helps us understand how there can be a world at all.

It would have been good, thought Peter, in his very human way, to remain on the mountain where Christ's glory shone so brightly and their own prospects seemed so promising. But they couldn't. Down they had to go, and to a very different world in which the 'beloved Son' would very soon be betrayed, arrested, condemned, crucified and deserted even by God Himself. Good Friday began with Jesus enjoying the Last Supper with the disciples (Mark 14:17). It would end with His burial, cold and lifeless, in a borrowed tomb. The world was rid of Him, the most turbulent of all prophets.

Easter morning

But it wasn't. The women who had followed Him from Galilee had taken careful note of where He was buried, and they waited

impatiently for the Sabbath to be over so that they could go and anoint His body (Mark 16:1-8). Their names (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome) are carefully recorded, making it easy to falsify their story, had it not been true; their behaviour on Easter morning has the moments of irrationality we might expect in people who have lost a loved one in appalling circumstances and aren't really in control of their own grief. After all, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had already anointed the body (John 19:39-40), and then there was that huge stone at the mouth of the tomb. They knew they could never move it, but they pressed on regardless.

When they reached the tomb an awesome sight confronted them. Not only had the stone been moved, but, when they entered the burial-place, they saw a figure in white calmly sitting there. It tried to calm their fears: 'You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him' (Mark 16:6 ESV). There was nothing there, and never since that day has anyone been able to put anything there. Jesus' tomb remains a void which the best efforts of the Jewish and Roman authorities, sceptical historians and radical biblical scholars have never been able to fill. Contemporary records remain silent, none daring to offer any suggestion as to where it might, after all, be lying. Nor has anyone been able to offer a better account for its disappearance than the one offered by the angel: 'He has risen' (Mark 16:6). And when Mark tells us that the women fled, 'for they were afraid', the emotion is perfectly natural. They had encountered not only the unexpected and the amazing, but the seriously scary and uncanny: the eruption of the divine into human history. And everything in the story fits.

Resurrections aren't proved by voids

But just as wars aren't won by evacuations, resurrections aren't proved by voids. The Empty Tomb was followed by a series of appearances of the risen Christ. We have no reason to think that any of those to whom He appeared was a victim of wishful thinking. Not one

of Jesus' followers expected ever to see Him again. Nor were the appearances confined to particular types of individual, or groups, or locations. He was seen by a remarkably diverse range of people: Mary Magdalene; Peter and John; the Eleven all gathered together; the two disconsolate disciples on the road to Emmaus; James, Jesus' brother, who had once thought Him mad (Mark 3:21); and Thomas, who refused point-blank to believe the story (John 20:25). On one occasion, He was seen by a gathering of 500 people, many of whom, according to St Paul, were still living when he wrote his First Epistle to the Corinthians (I Cor. 15:6). Had the case been subjected to a judicial review, it would have taken many, many months to hear the testimonies, cross-examine the witnesses and listen to the hostile testimony of expert psychiatrists arguing that each of the 500-plus eyewitnesses was as mad as a March hare.

Clearly, the personalities of those privileged to see the risen Christ varied widely, but there is no evidence whatever that any of them was neurotic or delusional; and certainly no evidence that these appearances turned them into incoherent fanatics. On the contrary, they went on to produce the world's most enduring and widely-read literature. Few today could give the names of the great Roman writers of the first century. Livy and Ovid are remembered only by scholars: millions are familiar with Matthew, Peter and John, all of whom saw the risen Christ and went on to write letters and histories which have challenged the world's finest minds for centuries. Besides, they were prepared not only to tell what they had seen, but to suffer and die for it: and that, not only because they knew it to be true, but because they believed that the one they had seen was the very one they would have to meet again on the Day of Judgment.

But no less remarkable than the variety of personalities to whom Christ appeared is the variety of circumstances. He appeared to Mary Magdalene in the very garden in which He had been buried (and in such a lowly form that she mistook Him for the gardener). That same

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evening, He overtook two men walking home to Emmaus: men who had clearly looked to Him as the Messiah, and whose hopes had been cruelly dashed by the crucifixion. They had a memorable conversation with Him, but as they were about to share a meal with Him, He suddenly vanished. Only then did they realise who the stranger was, and they couldn't wait to tell the news. They immediately retraced their footsteps and made the seven-mile journey back to Jerusalem, only to discover that the disciples already knew; as the excited group discussed the news, Jesus Himself suddenly stood among them, even though the doors were locked.

Thomas wasn't present on that occasion, and when told the story, he dismissed it instantly, declaring that unless he could see and feel for himself the marks of the nails in Jesus' body, he would never believe. A week later, Jesus again appears to the disciples, still meeting behind closed doors. This time Thomas is present, and Jesus offers him the visible, physical proof he had laid down as a condition of believing. Ashamed of his doubts, Thomas can only exclaim, 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20:27).

John tells of another, remarkably leisurely occasion, when, early one morning, Jesus revealed Himself to a group of disciples by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-14). They were fishing, and He stood on the shore, unrecognised. He approached them and asked if they had any fish. 'No!' They had caught nothing. He told them to change their tactics and to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. They took a huge haul, and only then did they recognise that it was the Lord. By the time they got back to land, He had already prepared a barbecue, and they enjoyed a hearty breakfast.

It is remarkable that the Gospel of John, which begins with a sublime proclamation of Christ as the eternal Word of God (John 1:1-17), should end with this, the most physical of all the New Testament accounts of the resurrection.

On this occasion Jesus spent considerable time with the disciples, and it is clear from the opening chapter of Acts that this was not

unusual. In the forty days between His resurrection and His ascension, He resumed His teaching ministry, patiently clarifying what He had earlier taught about the kingdom of God, commissioning them as His witnesses, making plain the universal range of their mission, promising that they would shortly be empowered for this mission by the Holy Spirit, and directing them to remain in Jerusalem till that promise was fulfilled (Acts 1:1-9). There is nothing rushed here: His lessons even left time for questions (and sometimes not very apt ones, Acts 1:6-8).

The series of resurrection appearances ends with the Ascension of Jesus, recorded in Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:9-11. Gathered at Bethany, the disciples receive Jesus' final benediction and stand transfixed, gazing heavenwards till a cloud (the symbol of the divine presence) takes Him out of their sight. But whereas the women on Easter morning had fled from the tomb, traumatised, the disciples on this occasion returned to Jerusalem with great joy (Luke 24.52). Yet the Ascension was a defining moment. They would never see Him again in this life, and though His future disciples would love Him, they would love Him as those who had never seen Him (1 Pet. 1:8).

The Damascus Road

But there was one clear exception: Saul of Tarsus, to whom Jesus appeared on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-19). He himself describes this appearance as 'untimely' (1 Cor. 15:8, *ESV*), and this was probably one of the reasons why many members of the church in Corinth regarded him as a second-rate apostle. He himself is clear, however, that what happened to him was not some mere visionary experience. It was an actual appearance of the risen Christ, who quickly identified Himself as 'Jesus' (Acts 9:5). Saul had seen the Lord, as surely as Peter and James and John had seen Him.

This was the origin of Paul's faith in Christ. Up to this point, the persecution of the church had been his profession, the extinction of Christianity his consuming passion. Jesus was a fake, a fraud and a blasphemer, and yet His movement was gathering momentum at such

a rate that He was now, in Saul's view, a threat to both his religion and his nation. There is no sign here of any predisposition to believe that this man, this Jesus, whom God had so clearly cursed, might have risen from the dead; no sign of self-doubt; no hint that Saul's attitude had begun to change and that he had begun to think that perhaps the rumours about Jesus were true. There was certainly nothing in Judaism, nor in the other religions of his day, to prompt him towards believing that a crucified man had risen from the dead.

Never did Paul's enmity against Christianity burn more intensely than it did on that journey to Damascus, his mind filled with thoughts of hatred and slaughter. But then came a spiritual thunderclap. In the full flush of fanaticism, he is arrested by the one he knew was dead. A light from heaven falls on him and he falls to the ground confused and blinded. A Voice speaks. It knows who he is, and it knows his mission: 'Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' he cries. 'I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting.'

Saul of Tarsus is an historical figure and, as such, proof once again that God is to be found not at the conclusion of elaborate philosophical arguments, but within the history of redemption. His faith rested on what he had seen with his eyes and heard with his ears. Yet his experience on the Damascus Road was not only an *historical* event. It was also an *historic* one, on which the whole subsequent human story would turn, as Saul travelled the known world preaching, writing, organising, and carrying the extraordinary message of a crucified and risen Messiah to regions which still lay in the grip of paganism and polytheism. It is a thrilling story, but its roots lie in this encounter with a dead man who had risen. The one he hated, he now loved; the one he had seen as the enemy of his people was now their Messiah; the one from whom he had recoiled as a blasphemer was now God's beloved Son, vindicated in the wonder of His resurrection.

From this point onwards, Saul of Tarsus would live for Christ. For Him, he sacrificed his academic and political career. For His sake, he

would face flogging, shipwreck, privation, contempt, imprisonment and, finally, execution. For Him, he would use his mighty intellect. For Him, he would do whatever it took to make people listen to His gospel.

Why so much space to the resurrection?

Why devote so many paragraphs to the resurrection? Not simply to prove the resurrection itself, but to use it to point to something even greater: the existence of a living, loving, intelligent and powerful God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who can make the dead live and who, as the great guarantor of Moral Order, will one day put everything right. Sometimes that moral order seems to be completely overthrown, as it did when lawlessness crucified Christ. But God raised Him from the dead, and by doing so, He gave history an entirely new colour. Light reigns.