

The Resurrection

All the New Testament writers agree that Jesus was raised to life on the third day after his death. The reactions of other people to this claim will of course depend to a large extent on their basic presuppositions about the supernatural. Those who begin from the assumption that anything beyond our normal experience is impossible will obviously have to find some other explanation for what the first Christians thought was the resurrection of Jesus. Those who accept the possibility of unique occurrences which seem to go beyond regular human experience will no doubt find it worthwhile to pay serious attention to some of the claims of the New Testament. With the general collapse of the rationalist-materialist world-view in recent years, and the emergence of so-called 'New Age' postmodern spirituality, the dominance of an unbridled scepticism in Western culture has gradually been eroded, so that there is probably a greater openness about such matters at the start of this new millennium than has been the case for some time. That should not be used as a substitute for critical consideration of the evidence, such as it is, though it certainly changes the atmosphere in which such examination can take place.

There can be no question that the earliest Christians were completely convinced that the resurrection event, or complex of events, was a real, historical happening that had taken place in their own world, and which had exercised a profound influence on their own lives. Whereas it is unclear just how widespread was belief in the conception of Jesus by a virgin, the resurrection was a different matter altogether. Paul spoke for the whole of the early church when he declared that, if the reality of Jesus' resurrection was denied, the Christian faith would be emptied of its meaning: 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins' (1 [Corinthians 15:17](#)). By way of unpacking that conviction, Paul proceeded in the same passage to give a list of people who could verify that Jesus had come to life again, so he obviously thought of the resurrection event as something that could be attested by witnesses—an outward, public happening rather than a private, mystical experience. At the same time, one of the other dominant features of the New Testament accounts is that nowhere do they provide an account of the actual act of rising again, only of the results of that act as demonstrated through the appearances of the risen Jesus, and the fact that his tomb was found empty.

The belief of the early church

The earliest evidence for the resurrection almost certainly goes back to the time immediately after it is alleged to have taken place. This is the evidence contained in the summaries of Christian faith found in the first part of the Acts of the Apostles. Of course, these are now contained in a document that was compiled in its present form at least thirty years after the death of Jesus, and perhaps as much as fifty years later, but there is a widespread consensus that the first few chapters of Acts preserve material from very early sources. The language used in speaking about Jesus in the early speeches in Acts is quite different from that which was in common use when the book was compiled in its final form. It is even quite different from the letters of Paul, which were certainly written long before the book of Acts. So we may be reasonably confident that here we have very early sources.

These early speeches indicate a largely Jewish type of Christianity, showing a set of simply expressed beliefs about Jesus, and providing a generally believable account of what life might have been like in the first days of the church. According to this picture, the central feature of the early Christian church's message was the story of Jesus himself—how he had come to fulfil God's promises, how he had died on the cross, and how he had come back to life again. This message was so consistently expressed that it has been possible to discern a regular pattern of statements that were apparently made about Jesus from the very earliest times. C.H.

Dodd, who first identified this pattern of statements, called it *kerygma*, a Greek word meaning ‘the declaration’. Every authentic account of the Christian message contained these statements:

- Jesus has fulfilled the Old Testament promises;
- God was at work in his life, death and resurrection;
- Jesus has now been exalted to heaven;
- The Holy Spirit has been given to the church;
- Jesus will soon return in glory;
- All who hear the message must respond to its challenge, showing a willingness to change their lifestyle and follow Jesus.

If the resurrection was to be removed from this *kerygma*, then most of it would no longer make sense. The whole existence of the early church was based on the belief that Jesus was no longer dead, but was alive.

It also seems likely from the evidence in Paul’s letters, as well as from Acts, that the recognized qualification for an apostolic leader was that he or she had seen the risen Jesus. This was explicitly made a condition when the apostles came to appoint a successor to Judas Iscariot ([Acts 1:21–22](#)), and Paul also claimed that his own vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus gave him the same status as those who had been apostles before him ([Galatians 1:11–17](#)).

The evidence of Paul

The second main piece of evidence regarding the resurrection is provided by Paul himself in [1 Corinthians 15](#). If there is room for differing opinions on the importance of the evidence of Acts, there is no such room in the case of Paul’s evidence. He was certainly writing his letter no more than twenty-five years after Jesus was crucified, and his statements might well form the earliest piece of documentary evidence for belief that Jesus had risen again. It is obvious, both from the contents of 1 Corinthians and from its context, that Paul’s main intention there was not to give a reasoned argument for believing in the resurrection of Jesus. He was, rather, trying to help his readers to overcome a specific set of problems that had arisen in their local faith community. The information he included about how Jesus rose from the dead is more or less accidental, which in itself makes it all the more impressive, for he reminded the Corinthians that what he was saying was something they had always known and believed. Even though he sketched the details in just a few sentences, his account shows that at a very early date Christians, even in Greece, were quite familiar with the full story of how Jesus had died and come back to life again.

In this account Paul refers to an occasion when the risen Jesus was seen by more than 500 disciples at one time, most of whom he says were still alive when he wrote and could confirm what he said ([1 Corinthians 15:6](#)). He also mentions an appearance to James, the brother of Jesus, and includes his own conversion encounter with the risen Lord among these resurrection appearances ([1 Corinthians 15:7–8](#)). Though they were all written later than Paul’s letters to Corinth, the gospels never mention these appearances of the risen Jesus at all, which suggests that the fact of Jesus’ resurrection was so widely believed among the first generations of Christians that the people who wrote the gospel stories did not even think it important to marshal *all* the evidence for it. As with the rest of the narratives, they used only a small selection of the material that was at their disposal.

The gospel traditions

The stories found at the end of each of the four gospels are of course the main source of information about Jesus’ resurrection. There are certain distinctive features about these stories:

- They all emphasize two main facts: that the grave of Jesus was found empty, and that the risen Jesus was seen by different people on several different occasions. Both these pieces of evidence were important. By

itself, the fact of the empty grave would prove nothing except that Jesus' body was not there. Without the empty grave, the visions would prove nothing objective, though they might reveal something about the mental state of the disciples. But the combination of the two facts, if they are indeed correct, would be strong evidence in support of the claim that Jesus was alive.

- When the resurrection narratives are compared with many of the other stories about Jesus, they are told in a relatively simple and uncomplicated way. For example, they contain no symbolism requiring special insight to understand, nor are there many subtle allusions to the Old Testament, nor any real attempts to bring out the theological significance of the events they describe. If they are compared in this respect with, say, the accounts of how Jesus was baptized, the contrast is very marked indeed.

The disciples

The fourth and final piece of evidence relating to the resurrection event is the indisputable fact that a thoroughly disheartened band of disciples, who should by all the rules of historical probability have been depressed and disillusioned by their leader's crucifixion, was, in the space of seven weeks, transformed into a strong band of courageous witnesses, and the nucleus of a constantly growing church. The central fact of their witness was that Jesus was alive and active, and they had no hesitation in attributing the change in themselves to what had happened as a result of his rising from the dead. They themselves were obviously convinced that this was what had actually happened, for the resurrection was not just something they talked about: it was something they were willing to die for. It is beyond doubt that no one dies for something unless they are totally convinced of its truth.

Facts and faith about the resurrection

So much, then, for the various pieces of information supplied by the New Testament. What can be made of them? Firstly, three general observations are worth making:

- There is no evidence that the risen Jesus appeared to anyone apart from his own followers, though it is possible that he might have done so. Those who wrote the gospels were writing for a specific readership, which was either a Christian readership or people who were already sufficiently interested in the Christian faith to want to know more about it. In this context, the first concern of the gospels was to describe what it might be like when disciples encounter the living Jesus.
- Evidence about somebody who appeared and disappeared in a room with closed doors is obviously quite a different kind of evidence from that historians normally deal with. That is not to say it should be inadmissible, but it certainly does not fit into the ordinary rules of evidence.
- The fact that Mary Magdalene, the married couple on the road to Emmaus, and the disciples in the boat on Lake Galilee all failed to recognize Jesus, though they knew him well and had seen him only a few days before, suggests that his physical appearance must have changed in a way that would certainly be confusing to any ordinary witness in giving evidence.

What, then, can be said on the basis of these various pieces of evidence? There can be no question that the earliest church believed that Jesus had come back to life again. The disciples and their followers knew that something had happened to change their lives after the crucifixion of their master, and they explained this change by the fact that he had risen from the dead. But to speak of this kind of 'resurrection faith' is one thing; to speak plausibly of a 'resurrection fact' is quite another. Obviously there must have been something that can be called the 'resurrection fact' which called forth the disciples' 'resurrection faith'. But what was it? It does not have to begin with the actual rising of Jesus' physical body from death, and it is not difficult to think of alternative explanations:

The ‘resurrection fact’ was a subjective experience

A natural reaction to the evidence about the resurrection is to suppose that the so-called ‘resurrection appearances’ were purely subjective. The pious might call them visions; psychologists would be more inclined to call them hallucinations. If we could assume that this is what happened, it would solve the problem. But it is not quite so simple:

- The fact that the tomb was empty, and that neither friend nor enemy produced the body of Jesus is so strongly emphasized in the gospels that it must be accounted for. Both the Romans and Jesus’ religious opponents had an obvious vested interest in producing a body, for that would have squashed the Christian movement once and for all. It is therefore safe to assume that neither of these groups had removed it. The disciples, on the other hand, were prepared to stake their lives on the fact that Jesus was alive. Many of them were brutally murdered for their faith, including Peter and other members of Jesus’ inner circle, who would be prime suspects for removing the body. It is highly improbable, if not impossible, to imagine that they would have willingly suffered in this way, if all the time they knew where they themselves had hidden Jesus’ body.
- Although an individual experience like that of Peter or James might be reasonably regarded as subjective, and an appearance to a crowd of 500 might sound like a mass hallucination, an encounter such as that on the road to Emmaus, with the absence of excitement and the gradual recognition of the stranger by two people, has all the marks of an authentic account. The statements that the risen body could be touched, that the risen Jesus ate food with his disciples, and that he breathed on them, show the disciples were convinced they were in contact with a real physical body and not a vision.
- Unlike the other disciples, Paul was what might be called ‘psychically experienced’. He writes of having had visions and revelations of a mystical nature on several occasions ([1 Corinthians 14:18](#); [2 Corinthians 12:1–4](#)), but he placed his Damascus road experience in a different category altogether. For him it was quite distinctive, to be compared only to the appearances of the risen Jesus to the other disciples. All the accounts describe encounters with the risen Jesus as an apparently unique kind of experience—neither purely subjective like dreams, nor purely objective, but with some of the characteristics of both.

The ‘resurrection fact’ was a theological creation

It has been argued that the ‘resurrection faith’ arose because the disciples saw some theological reason that required it. Because they believed Jesus to be God’s Messiah it would be natural for someone who claimed this position to rise from the dead. This explanation, however, raises more questions than it answers:

- There is no evidence from any source at all to suggest that the Messiah was expected to rise from the dead. On the contrary, the Messiah was popularly expected to kill other people and, if he suffered and died himself, by definition he was not going to be regarded as the Messiah.
- The Old Testament expresses a very negative attitude to the idea of resurrection, and many Jews simply did not believe it was possible. The disciples themselves appear not to have known what it was earlier in the ministry of Jesus ([Mark 9:9–10](#)).
- It is also difficult to see how the idea of resurrection can have come from an interpretation of Old Testament expectations, since the resurrection stories are completely lacking in scriptural quotations. In this respect there is a sharp contrast with the stories of the crucifixion, which are full of such allusions. In addition, there was no consistent expectation of life after death in the Hebrew tradition, let alone any preconceived notion of what it might be like.

The ‘resurrection fact’ was a later belief

It has also been argued that belief in Jesus’ resurrection was a late idea, only coming to prominence after the

Christians had been forced to leave Jerusalem at the time of the Jewish revolt against the Romans (A.D.66–70). Up until then, they regularly met for worship at the tomb of Jesus. But what could they do once they had been barred from entering the city? To answer that question, the story of the empty tomb was put together to explain why, after all, they did not need to worship there.

Worship at the tombs of heroes is a common practice. It happened in Jesus' day (see [Matthew 23:29](#)), and Christian pilgrims of later generations have certainly visited Jesus' traditional burial site in the Church of the Resurrection, or its rival, the so-called 'Garden Tomb'. But to suggest that the discontinuation of such a practice in the first century led to belief that Jesus was alive is completely far-fetched. For one thing, there is no evidence that anybody at all was interested in the place where Jesus was buried, earlier than the fourth century. In addition, there are the statements made by Paul in 1 Corinthians, written at least ten years before A.D.66. By that time, one gospel had certainly been written and, furthermore, the gospel accounts were undoubtedly based on stories that went right back into the earliest days of the church. It makes no sense at all to suppose that belief in the resurrection was a late development. The fact is that Christians did not venerate the tomb of Jesus because they believed there was nothing in it—and they held this belief right from the start.

Many other more fanciful suggestions have been made from time to time to account for the 'resurrection fact'. But the overwhelming weight of all the evidence suggests that, however it might be described in cognitive abstractions, the 'resurrection fact' was a real, historical event. No other hypothesis gives an adequate account of so much of the evidence.

What does the resurrection mean?

To talk of describing the 'resurrection fact' in abstract terms, not to mention the language of scientific enquiry, moves well beyond the categories of thought of the first disciples. One of the most striking things about the evidence of the New Testament is that the disciples appear to have had no interest at all in probing the whys and wherefores of the 'resurrection fact'. They knew it was a real fact, because of their own experience of Jesus Christ and the evidence of the empty tomb—and that was all they needed to know. This no doubt helps to explain why there is no description anywhere in the New Testament of how the resurrection actually took place. Some Christians in the second century regarded this as a deficiency in the New Testament, and produced their own vivid descriptions of what the body of Jesus looked like, how it came out of the grave, and how those who saw it were affected by the experience. But for the first witnesses such details were not the main focus of interest. For them, the resurrection was not just a happy ending to the story of Jesus; it was the natural climax of the whole of his life, and the vindication of the high claims made for him during his ministry. It was also a guarantee that the life and teaching of Jesus was not just an interesting chapter in the history of human thought, but was the way through which men and women could come to know God. This is why the proclamation of a living Jesus became the central part of the message the disciples declared throughout the known world.

But why was it so very important? Why did Paul claim that without the resurrection of Jesus the whole of the Christian message would be meaningless? A good way to answer this question is to put it the other way round: rather than asking negatively what would be lost if the resurrection could be disproved, asking what positive place the resurrection held in the beliefs of the first Christians. Three claims are made in this respect:

The resurrection and Jesus' identity

Jesus' claims to be the Son of God were shown to be true. Peter said on the Day of Pentecost that the resurrection was a clear proof that 'God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah' ([Acts 2:36](#)). Paul wrote to the Christians of Rome that Jesus was 'declared Son of God by a mighty act in that he rose from the dead' ([Romans 1:4](#)). In spite of Jesus' authority displayed in his teaching and actions, and the implied claims about his central role in God's plan, without the resurrection he might have been thought of simply as

a great and good man. But after he had risen from the grave, his followers knew for certain that he was who he had claimed to be. They could now see and appreciate his whole life on earth in a new and fuller way, as the life of God personally lived out among ordinary mortals.

The resurrection and new life

The resurrection was more than just a new light on the crucified Jesus. It is emphasized throughout the New Testament, and especially by Paul, that the resurrection, as well as the cross, was an indispensable part of the arrival of God's kingdom and all that entailed. The first Christians were practical people rather than theorists. What they wanted was something that would work in real life. They were longing for some kind of personal empowerment that would enable them to be the best people they could possibly be. They understood this in terms of living at peace with God, and being delivered from their self-centredness to live in harmony with other people and, indeed, with the natural environment. They realized that this was unlikely to be achieved either by formal religious observance or by their own efforts at self-improvement, and what was needed was some fresh, energizing life-force that could transform the human personality.

Paul found this new life-force in Jesus, and expressed it in a mystical way as a union between the deepest recesses of his own person, and the Jesus who had been crucified and raised from death. It was such a striking reality for him that he could even write, 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' ([Galatians 2:20](#)). This was not just conventionally religious language, for Paul seems to have meant what he said in the most literal sense: Jesus was now living in him in such a way that even the details of his life were determined not by him but by this living Christ. In trying to express all this, Paul used imagery in which he compared the baptism of Christians to the death and resurrection of Jesus ([Romans 6:1-10](#)). In baptism, Christians were covered with water as a physical symbol of something that would also happen inwardly and spiritually, so that being drenched with water was like being buried, as Jesus was, and coming out of the water was like being raised again, as Jesus was. The essence of Paul's understanding of these events was that becoming a Christian involved a willingness to 'die', in the sense of shedding a self-centred existence, in order to be 'raised' again and receive a new existence, the life of Jesus Christ himself living within.

So the resurrection of Jesus was crucial, for if Jesus had only died on the cross, he might well have been understood to have set an example, or offered a sacrifice, or paid the price of human freedom—but his suffering would have had no power to affect everyday living. Without the resurrection, the cross might have been an interesting theological talking point, but would have been powerless to have any lasting effect on the lives of ordinary people. Because of the resurrection, however, Paul had discovered a new life: 'For to me, life is Christ' ([Philippians 1:21](#)). Moreover, he was confident that this was to be the normal experience of everyone who was a Christian: Jesus Christ actually living in those who commit themselves to him.

The resurrection and future hope

The resurrection of Jesus has a further implication for those who already have Christ's life within them. An important part of Jesus' teaching in John's Gospel was that his followers would share in 'eternal life' ([John 3:15](#); [4:14](#); [17:3](#)). This 'eternal life' included two things. On the one hand, the phrase indicates that Christians were expecting to enjoy a new quality of life: 'eternal life' is 'God's life' and, when Paul wrote of his own Christian experience of Christ living within him, he was reflecting a similar conviction.

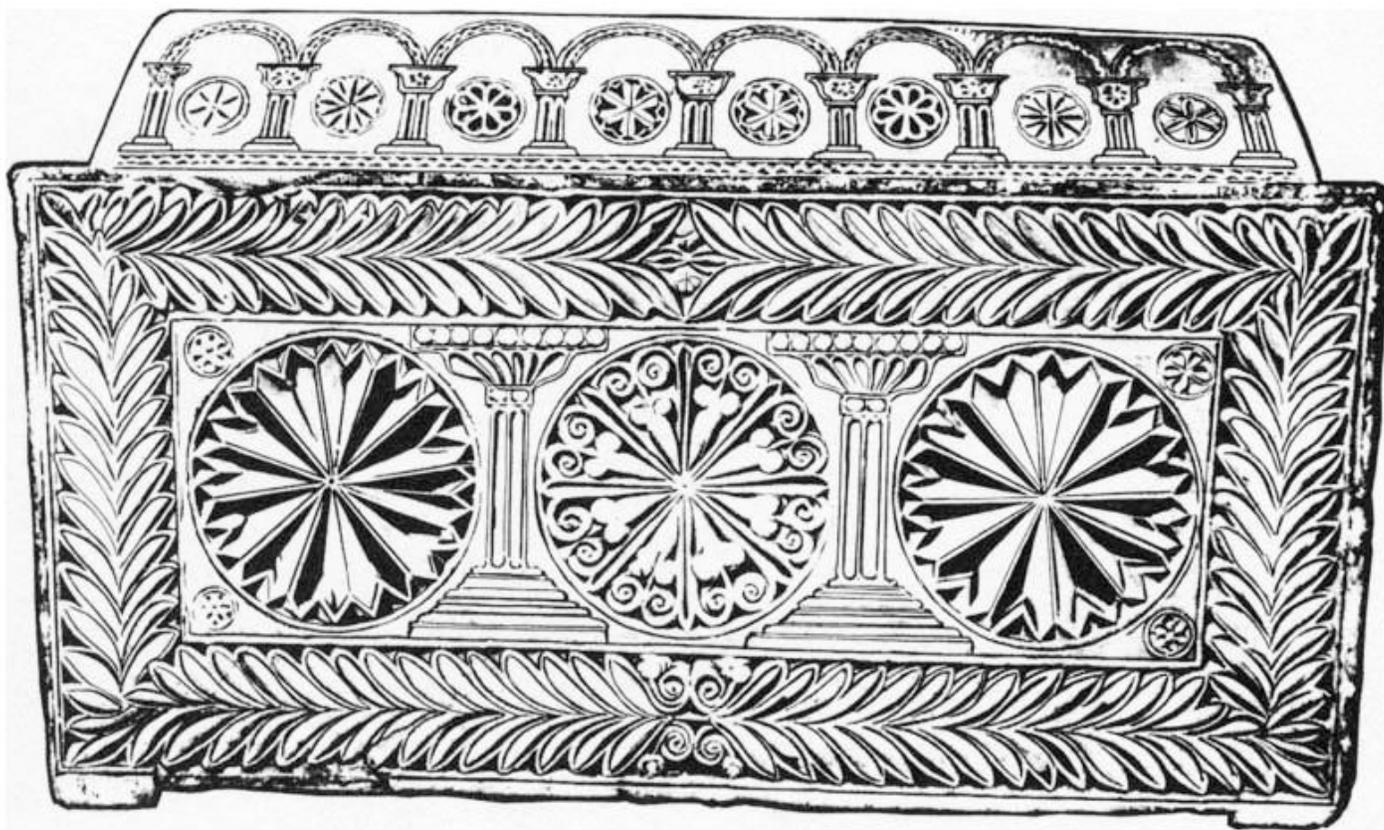
On the other hand, to have the kind of life that God has does not just mean that Christians have a new dynamic for life in this world; it also implies that their relationship with God inaugurated by faith in Christ will never end. This distinctive aspect of Jesus' teaching was reinforced and emphasized by Paul when he wrote that the resurrected Jesus should be regarded as 'the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep' ([1 Corinthians 15:20](#)). He understood this to mean that Jesus' rising again was a pledge and a promise that his disciples, too, would survive death. Those people who shared in Christ's sufferings and resurrection in a spiritual

sense had the assurance of a life beyond the grave which, like their present lives, would be infused by the personal presence of God. But it would also be distinctive and new, for this resurrection life takes its character from the fact that Jesus is risen, and therefore shares the incomparable nature of that kind of renewed existence now enjoyed by Jesus—a life in which suffering, death and oppression are gone for ever and replaced by the new ways of God’s kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:57).

To understand more fully what the implications of that might be, we now need to move on to consider Jesus’ teaching about God’s way of doing things, that different way of being which is called ‘the kingdom of God’.

Why do the accounts differ?

Despite the fact that the information given in the gospels is narrated in a simple way, the gospel accounts are not easy to reconcile with one another. Though many people have tried, no one has been completely successful in producing an ‘agreed version’ of how the New Testament says it all happened. It is unlikely that anyone ever will. Throughout their work, the gospel writers were selective. They used only those stories and teachings of Jesus that would be helpful to their first readers. This is one of the reasons there are four different gospels: because people in different parts of the empire had their own varied concerns. This process of selection was clearly applied to the resurrection stories, as can be seen from the fact that Paul preserves some pieces of information not mentioned by any of the gospels.



An ossuary. After a body decomposed, the bones were gathered together and placed in this kind of container.

At first sight, this might appear to be an argument against the resurrection having happened at all, but it can also be claimed as a strong argument on the other side. Eye-witnesses often give very different accounts of what they have seen, especially when they see things that do not fit in with their expectations of how things should be. The disciples themselves had no expectation at all that a dead person might come to life again. [Mark 9:9–10](#) suggests they had no idea what ‘resurrection’ could possibly mean; it was something quite alien to their way of thinking. It is not surprising then that the disciples did not tell a logical and coherent story. The story of someone rising from the dead would be much more difficult to believe if all four

gospels had given exactly the same account. Yet, despite minor discrepancies in detail, all the accounts are agreed on the main parts of the story. In all of them the tomb is empty and Jesus appears to the disciples.

In Mark, the earliest gospel, the account ends at 16:8, and what follows in some English versions as 16:9–20 is generally considered to be a later addition. In this account, some women who came to the grave on the Sunday morning to finish the process of embalming Jesus' body found that the stone slab used as a door to the rock tomb had been rolled back, and were terrified by the sight of a young man in white sitting inside. This 'young man' (who is clearly intended to be understood as an angel) said, 'Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here, see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you' (Mark 16:6–7). At that, the women ran terrified from the graveyard, and because of their fear they told no one of what they had seen and heard.

Luke includes the story of a couple returning to their home in the village of Emmaus, who met the risen Jesus without recognizing him. They spoke of women visiting the grave and seeing a vision of angels, who assured them that Jesus was alive (Luke 24:22–24). But no reference is made here to Jesus going to Galilee. Many sophisticated explanations have been proposed for this, though it is not inconceivable that the women did not deliver this message for the simple reason stated by Mark: they were afraid to go back there, for they thought that the king of that area, Herod Antipas, would now be ready to get rid of any of Jesus' followers who were found there.

Matthew repeats Mark's account, though with some additional details, mostly directed towards heightening the supernatural trappings of the event. He speaks of a great earthquake on the Sunday morning, and also mentions the terror of the guards at the tomb (Matthew 28:1–4). In this account, the women are still central but left the grave in a mixed mood of fear and joy, and were met by Jesus himself, who repeated the message about going to Galilee (Matthew 28:5–10). Matthew includes a story showing how the disciples followed this instruction at once, and describes how they met with the risen Jesus on a mountain in Galilee, where they were commissioned to take his message to all nations and invite others to join them in a life of discipleship (Matthew 28:16–20). This appearance of Jesus seems not to be the same as the ascension story told by Luke. Though Jesus is reported as making some similar statements on each occasion, the ascension took place not in Galilee but in or near Jerusalem (Luke 24:44–53; Acts 1:6–11). In effect, Matthew brings the story begun by Mark to its logical conclusion: Jesus' appearance in Galilee and commission to the disciples to proclaim the good news about him.

Luke's story has certain differences from Mark's: there were two angels in the tomb, and Galilee is mentioned not as the location where Jesus would meet the disciples later, but as the place where he had originally foretold his death and resurrection (Luke 24:1–11). When the women told the disciples their story, it was not believed. In some old manuscripts of Luke, there is at this point a story of how Peter and John visited the tomb to confirm what the women reported, but this is probably a later effort to harmonize Luke's story with the incident recorded in John 20:1–10. After telling of how Jesus met the couple on the road to Emmaus, and then appeared to all the disciples in a room in Jerusalem (Luke 24:13–43), Luke goes on to record the ascension on the road to Bethany, as if it followed immediately after the resurrection (Luke 24:44–53). But in Acts he makes it clear that the ascension took place after an interval of forty days (Acts 1:3). He does not mention an appearance in Galilee.

John's Gospel, on the other hand, describes appearances of Jesus both in Jerusalem and in Galilee. Of the women named in the other gospels as having discovered the empty grave, only Mary Magdalene is mentioned here, though the fact that she uses the plural pronoun 'we' in reporting the event to Peter implies that others were with her (John 20:1–2). They found the tomb empty and returned to tell the disciples, whereupon Peter and John then went to the tomb and found the grave clothes lying undisturbed—proof that the tomb had not been robbed (John 20:3–10). At this point Mary saw two angels in the tomb and was greeted by Jesus, whom she mistook for the gardener (John 20:11–18). An account then follows of two appearances to the disciples in Jerusalem. During the first of these Jesus breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit (John 20:19–29), while the last chapter of John, which is almost certainly a later addition, albeit by the same author, describes Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee, and how he had breakfast with them before recommissioning Peter (John 21:1–25).

The ascension

The ascension as such features only in Luke's story of Jesus' life. It is unclear whether Luke 24:50–53 tells of it, for in some ancient manuscripts the crucial words 'and was taken up into heaven' are missing. But Luke certainly documents it in more detail in Acts 1:6–11. This story marks the point at which the regular resurrection appearances of Jesus ceased. As such, it is merely the culmination of several occasions when Jesus had disappeared from his disciples' gaze in the forty days following the resurrection. From the time of the resurrection itself, Jesus was understood to have been exalted into the presence of God.

When he left the couple at Emmaus, he did not return to some kind of earthbound limbo, but to the heavenly glory which, as the risen Son of man, he had now entered. The actual story of the ascension presumably reflects some particular occasion when he left the disciples in a dramatic and memorable way—and after which, they saw him no more. Though the ascension story itself is only recorded by Luke, the idea is referred to in several passages in John (20:17; 13:1; 16:10; 17:11), while Matthew's Gospel concludes with the conviction that Jesus had received precisely the kind of universal authority that the ascension story seems to imply.

The notion that Jesus was taken 'up into heaven' has sometimes been problematic for modern readers of the gospels. Certainly, we no longer share the perception of ancient people, that the universe is a three-tiered construction, with the earth sandwiched in the middle between the heavens and the underworld. In this frame of reference, it would be natural to think of Jesus being taken 'up to heaven'. But even today, that could easily be a natural, common sense way to describe such a disappearance. Acts 1:12 seems to place the ascension on the Mount of Olives, and Constantine subsequently built a church there, around a cave that he believed marked the spot. Later tradition identified an open space as the more likely site of the ascension. In AD.384, Egeria joined in a celebration of the ascension on a small hill a little further up the Mount of Olives, and some six years later a pilgrim called Poemenia had a shrine constructed there—around a rock which bears a mark allegedly made by Jesus' right foot as he said farewell to his disciples.

The New Testament's concern, however, is not with spatial definitions as such, but with the fact that Jesus himself had returned to be exalted in glory with God. This was always implicit in the 'Son of man' title, for in the book of Daniel this character received 'authority, honour, and royal power' (Daniel 7:14). In the context of imagery depicting the cross as Jesus' final battle with the forces of evil, and his resurrection as the proof that he had triumphed, then the ascension demonstrated that this victory was absolute. It was a way of affirming the cosmic dimensions of Christian salvation, declaring that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus were good news not only for people, but also for the world of nature, and indeed for everything in the entire universe. It brought order out of chaos and, in theological terms, represented the reversal of all that had gone wrong in the primeval fall, and both declared and inaugurated the possibility of renewal and rebirth.