

RAISED WITH CHRIST

HOW THE RESURRECTION
CHANGES EVERYTHING

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Raised with Christ: How the Resurrection Changes Everything

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT THE resurrection of Jesus and its effects on us today. If, like me, you have wondered why Christians often seem to talk more about the events of Good Friday than Easter Sunday, this book is for you. Although we talk about the death of Jesus often, for some reason we have tended to only mention the resurrection at Easter time. Christians sometimes even say Jesus died to save us without mentioning that he also rose for our salvation. It's time to redress the balance a bit and talk more about Jesus' death *and* resurrection.

For Christians all over the world, every Sunday is Resurrection Sunday. We meet each week, among other things, in order to celebrate the glorious, wondrous fact that Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus' resurrection really did change everything. It changed the cross from a tragedy into a triumph, and it changed the Roman Empire into a Christian state. This was the most powerful divine event in the history of creation, and it ushered in a new age of the Holy Spirit's activity and power in saving and transforming lives.

When considering if Christianity is true, it all boils down to whether Jesus rose from the dead. The lives of Christians today demonstrate that the resurrection is still changing people. It changes fear into love, despair into joy. The resurrection changes people from being spiritually dead to being alive to God. It changes guilty condemnation into a celebration of forgiveness and freedom. It changes anxiety into a hope that goes beyond the grave. It can change our sinful hearts so they want to follow the Lord Jesus, and the power of the resurrection is relentlessly killing sin in every true Christian. Because we neglect to emphasize this truth, many Christians have a meager expectation of the extent to which we can today experience resurrection life and victory over sin. The resurrection is far from being something we only benefit from in the future!

John MacArthur¹ claimed:

The Resurrection is the ground of our assurance, it is the basis for all our future hopes, and it is the source of power in our daily lives here and now. It gives us courage in the midst of persecution, comfort in the midst of trials, and hope in the midst of this world's darkness.²

It is no accident that many of these things that MacArthur credits to the resurrection are elsewhere also attributed to the activity of the Holy Spirit—namely assurance (Romans 8:16–24), a source of power in our daily lives (Romans 8:4), and a comfort (John 14:16, 26).

Through his resurrection Jesus became “a life-giving Spirit” (1 Corinthians 15:45), a whole new kind of human being, and enabled us to share in this new life. Also, it was only because of his resurrection and ascension that he was able to send the Holy Spirit into the world to carry out his special work in Christians (John 7:39; Acts 2:33). What the Spirit does for believers today is only possible as a result of the resurrection. Not only that, but Paul tells us in three places that Christians have already been raised with Christ:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. (Colossians 3:1)

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:4)

God . . . made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him. (Ephesians 2:5–6)

Christians have therefore already been changed by Jesus' resurrection. Jesus really is alive today. Because of this Christians are also alive in a whole new way. The same power that raised Christ from the dead is living in every true Christian. God wants us not just to believe in Jesus' resurrection but to be transformed by it and to receive the power we need to live the way we know we ought. If you already follow Jesus, then

¹Radio preacher, pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, and the leader of Grace to You ministries; see <http://gty.org>.

²John MacArthur's Preface, in Gerard Chrispin, *The Resurrection: The Unopened Gift* (Epsom, UK: Day One, 2002), 6.

this book aims to help you love him more. For all of us, the questions, *did Jesus rise from the dead?* and *what are the implications of his resurrection?* are the most important ones we will ever answer.

My hope is that you will not find this a complicated book. I write as an ordinary Christian, and not a theologian. My goal is that each of us can explore what the resurrection means and how we are affected today by what happened two thousand years ago.

As we begin, I pray that God himself will help each of us to better understand this wonderful subject and to live in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

C H A P T E R T W O

THE EMPTY CROSS, THE EMPTY TOMB

He is not here, for he has risen.

M A T T H E W 2 8 : 6

WE LIVE IN AN AGE OF global brands. In almost any city in the world, the golden “M” of McDonald’s beckons consumers to a predictable source of American food. There are many other such global companies today, which also have a simple memorable image or logo.

Probably the most universally recognized logo in the world today is also the most ancient still in use—the cross. Almost everyone would recognize it instantly, because it remains powerfully embedded in our consciousness.

Although in some church buildings crosses have a statue of Jesus on them, since the Reformation many Christians prefer an empty cross. This underlines that the work of Jesus is complete. Christianity hinges not only on the empty cross but also on an empty tomb. Surprisingly little classical art, however, has focused on the resurrection of Jesus, as compared to the cross. Despite this, only the resurrection transforms the cross from a symbol of despair to a symbol of hope. These two evocative images are both vital to our salvation. As Paul said:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15:3–4)

Some today argue that it does not really matter whether Jesus was

physically resurrected. As Francis Schaeffer¹ explained, they couldn't be more wrong:

The Bible says that Christ rose physically from the dead, that if you had been there that day you would have seen Christ stand up and walk away in a space-time, observable situation of true history. The materialist says, "No, I don't believe it. Christ was not raised from the dead." That is unbelief. Liberal theology is also unbelief because it says either that Jesus was not raised from the dead in history, or that maybe he was and maybe he wasn't because who knows what's going to happen in this world in which you can't be sure of anything. The historic resurrection of Christ doesn't really matter, says this theology; what matters is that the church got a big push from thinking he was raised in history. . . . Now I would say that the old liberalism, the new liberalism, and materialism are basically the same. To all of them finally the same word applies: *unbelief*.²

Jesus towers over human history. How we respond to him is foundational to how we see the world. Historians are very clear about two things concerning Jesus—he existed and he was crucified. No serious thinkers doubt those two facts. There are few events of ancient history with better evidence than this. If we cannot be sure Jesus lived and died, then we cannot be sure of almost any event in history before the modern era.

That a man lived and was crucified two thousand years ago is not unusual. Even being a great teacher, working miracles, and founding a religion does not make him unique. It is the claim of an empty tomb that marks Jesus as totally different from every other major historical figure. From an historical perspective, can we be sure that the tomb was indeed empty? What exactly happened those many years ago? Can any other explanation account for the explosive growth of Christ's church and its persistence throughout history?

Many Christian leaders have emphasized the importance of our view of the resurrection. We will share just two examples here:

¹One of the best-known Christian apologists of the twentieth century; see <http://francisschaefferfoundation.com>.

²Francis A. Schaeffer, "The Universe and Two Chairs," *Death in the City*, Chapter 9, in Book IV of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996).

C. S. Lewis:³ “The Christian story is precisely the story of one grand miracle, the Christian assertion being that what is beyond all space and time, what is uncreated, eternal, came into nature, into human nature, descended into His own universe, and rose again, bringing nature up with Him. It is precisely one great miracle. If you take that away there is nothing specifically Christian left.”⁴

Sam Storms:⁵ “I can honestly say that I’ve staked my life on an empty tomb. Everything I am, everything I own, everything I’ve done or hope to do hangs suspended on whether or not Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. The decision I made decades ago to put my trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is only as good as the tomb is empty. If Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, my life is a sham. I’ve invested everything in, staked everything on, entrusted everything to the historical fact of the empty tomb of Jesus. If his body and bones are still buried somewhere in Palestine, or have long since disintegrated under the force of time and the laws of physics, nothing has meaning for me, nor do I have meaning for anything or anyone else.”⁶

As we study the resurrection of Jesus, we are standing on holy ground. We are facing the most important question any human being will ever answer in his or her lifetime—did Jesus rise from the dead? Everything hinges on our response to that single question.

Human reason alone cannot prove to anyone that Jesus rose from the dead. We “know” that people simply do not stay dead for three days and then return to life. Since we have not seen such an event, our reason tells us it cannot have happened. To persuade our intellect to believe in the resurrection requires not only rational arguments but a gift of faith from God. Christianity is, however, a reasonable faith. So we need to study the evidence for the resurrection and be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). We need both a softened heart and an alert mind. Our powers of reasoning can strengthen our faith, and we have nothing to be ashamed of intellectually. As George Eldon Ladd⁷ concluded:

³Author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and many other books; an English professor and theological writer from Oxford, England.

⁴C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 80.

⁵Pastor of Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City and conference speaker; see <http://enjoyinggodministries.com>.

⁶Sam Storms, “What If Christ Is Not Risen?—Part 1”; <http://enjoyinggodministries.com/article/35-what-if-christ-is-not-risen-part-1>.

⁷Previously Professor of New Testament Exegesis and Theology at Fuller Seminary.

The historical evidences which prove the resurrection are obvious for all to see. The reason that all men do not see them is the sinful blindness of the human heart. Only the man of faith can see the facts of history. . . . Faith is not a blind leap in the dark without any historical evidences. Neither will historical evidences *demand* faith, for the man of unbelief will always come up with different historical explanations. However, faith is supported and reinforced by historical evidences.⁸

We will therefore use our minds to consider the evidence for the resurrection. Even many non-Christian historians and scholars now accept that the Gospels were written down within at most a few decades of Jesus' life and convey eyewitness testimony of what Christians claim happened on the first Easter Sunday. Thus, the best place for us to begin our quest to discover whether Jesus rose from the dead is by examining what the Bible claims to have occurred.

THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCES FOR THE RESURRECTION

In the following section, I will attempt to harmonize the various resurrection stories in the Bible.⁹ These accounts show a remarkable degree of agreement despite some apparent discrepancies (e.g., the number of women attending the tomb). We will see that small details that seem unclear within an individual Gospel account make perfect sense in the context of the other Gospels. A remarkably clear picture emerges from the stories taken as a whole.

We should not, however, put too much importance on exactly how these independent eyewitness accounts fit together. The Gospel writers deliberately did not attempt anything like the task I have perhaps foolishly set for myself here. The separate Gospel reports come across as eyewitness testimony of the same events, with the typical minor inconsistencies and differing perspectives that any lawyer recognizes would be humanly expected. These kinds of dis-

⁸George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), 10–12.

⁹I acknowledge the influence of others on the following account including Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus*, 91ff.; Gary Gromacki, "The Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ," *Journal of Ministry and Theology*, 6:1, 63–88 (Baptist Bible College and Seminary, 2002); John Walvoord, "The Person of Christ—Part IV: The Earthly Life of the Incarnate Christ," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 117:291–300 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1960); M. S. Mills, *The Life of Christ: A Study Guide to the Gospel Record* (Dallas: 3E Ministries, 1999).

crepancies are accepted as far more common in genuine testimony than would be seen in a manufactured story where every detail is agreed upon together.

It could be argued that any attempt to harmonize these stories is neither historically viable nor helpful for interpreting the Gospels. I am proceeding with a potentially fruitless endeavor to demonstrate that it is possible to weave these different reports into one consistent story. If the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection can be logically pieced together, like a jigsaw puzzle, in at least one way then, even if we are incorrect in some of our conclusions, we can be more confident that there must be a correct way of doing so. It is important to appreciate that some of the rest of this chapter is speculative. We have to trust God that he did not think it was necessary for us to know the answers to some of the questions we have about these events.

Before we continue, I encourage you to first read through Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20–21, Acts 1, and 1 Corinthians 15.

Matthew tells us that Jesus died more quickly than many victims of crucifixion, and his death was associated with some miraculous signs. “Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many” (Matthew 27:50–53). These remarkable events demonstrate that even as he died, Jesus remained in control of nature. The Lord of all was continuing to sustain the universe “by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3). Even as he died, he still had life-giving power that could empty tombs.¹⁰

Although his divine nature shared in the experience of the agony of death and separation from the Father, only his body was placed in the tomb. His spirit returned to God, and he promised the repentant thief, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”¹¹ Jesus effectively experienced hell on the cross, since hell means being separated from God. Despite some translations of an ancient creed, which

¹⁰These events do leave us with unanswerable questions. For example, why did those who had been raised not return to the city until Jesus’ resurrection and what did they do in the meantime?

¹¹Luke 23:43.

suggest that Jesus later “descended into hell,”¹² there is no biblical evidence to suggest that he actually did so.

Watching that day were some women who later played an extraordinary role in the events of the resurrection. We must spend a few moments understanding why this is so surprising. For Jesus to have a group of women traveling with him as disciples was very unusual in those days and revealed that he was no mere conservative follower of the culture of his day.¹³ Jesus gave great dignity to women. He treated them as friends and was willing to sit with them and teach them, defying all traditions of the day.

As an example of his amazing attitude toward women, we see the way he gently showed a Samaritan woman the way of salvation.¹⁴ Here was a teacher who did not despise women. He did not see them merely as servants to wait on the men. On one occasion he honored Mary, Lazarus’ sister, for choosing to sit with him and learn like the men rather than bustling about preparing the food.¹⁵ As a result of Jesus’ radical acceptance, many women followed him as part of his group.¹⁶ Unlike the male disciples who all “fell away”¹⁷ and deserted Jesus, the women remained faithful, even when Jesus was being crucified.

It was in the events of the resurrection that Jesus gave the highest honor to women. In the world of first-century Israel, the testimony of women did not count for much, and they could not testify in court.¹⁸ It is astonishing that Jesus made his first post-resurrection appearance to women including Mary Magdalene, who had been demonized¹⁹ and is believed by many to have had a dubious moral past. To then appoint them as the first messengers of the good news that he was risen from the dead shows the total absence of prejudice in Jesus. This astonishing

¹²The Apostles’ Creed. See the excellent discussion in Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 587. Grudem argues, “Until A.D. 650 no version of the Creed included this phrase with the intention of saying that Christ descended into hell” and then reviews other explanations Christians have put forward to understand the phrase in a non-literal manner.

¹³For a review of the role of women in the first century and the Bible, see Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 884.

¹⁴John 4.

¹⁵Luke 10:38–42.

¹⁶Luke 8:1–3.

¹⁷Matthew 26:31.

¹⁸“But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex.” Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), *Antiquities*, 4.219.

¹⁹Luke 8:2.

aspect of the resurrection story is very strong evidence for the genuineness of the account. No one would have invented an account so dependent on women as witnesses.

As the disciples scattered and were apparently nowhere to be seen, the women followed Joseph of Arimathea to see where Jesus would be buried. Their love for him was such that they wanted to care for his body. Only the arrival of the Sabbath could delay their tender care. As soon as it was practical, just before sunrise²⁰ on Sunday morning, they rushed to the tomb. Approaching the tomb together were Mary Magdalene,²¹ another Mary,²² Salome,²³ Joanna,²⁴ and probably several other women.²⁵ Their discussions on the way about how to move the stone were interrupted by an earthquake and an angel who appeared and dragged the stone away from the tomb.²⁶ The soldiers who were guarding the tomb fainted, then fled back to the city.²⁷ The women looked down, turning their heads from the frightening sight.²⁸ It is possible that all of this occurred simultaneously with the actual resurrection of Jesus, although it is just as likely that his body had already vanished from the tomb, passing through the graveclothes and the rocks with equal ease.

The frightened women looked up²⁹ and saw that the stone was removed. When Mary Magdalene saw this and two men standing there, she did not realize they were angels. She must have then run away to get Peter, leaving the other women behind. This context makes sense of what she said to Peter and John, which is not clarified in the context of John's Gospel alone: "*They* have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and *we* do not know where they have laid him."³⁰ Meanwhile, one of the angels appears to have led some of the other women into the tomb, saying:

²⁰Although some translations render Mark 16:2 as meaning after sunrise, others argue this can mean they had left before dark (as per John 20:1) and had arrived at the tomb "at the rising of the sun" (κϱϵν).

²¹Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10.

²²Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10.

²³Mark 16:1.

²⁴Luke 24:10.

²⁵Luke 23:55–24:1.

²⁶All the Gospels except Matthew reported that the earthquake happened before the women arrived at the tomb. In the Matthew account, it is possible to translate 28:2 as "a severe earthquake had occurred" (NASB).

²⁷Matthew 28:2–4.

²⁸Luke 24:5.

²⁹Mark 16:4. Mark's comment about looking up is difficult to understand without Luke's about them looking down (24:5). With a large group of people involved, there is little surprise that some seem to have seen one or both of the angels before the stone, and some, but not all, appear to have entered the tomb itself before they heard the angel's words.

³⁰John 20:2 (emphasis added).

Why do you seek the living among the dead?³¹ Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen.³² Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.³³ Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.³⁴

The remaining women, too fearful to tell anyone else along the way, then ran off to find the other disciples. Peter and “the other disciple” (widely understood to be John), together with Mary Magdalene, hurried to the tomb. The angels would not have long to wait before their next assignment.

John ran ahead and was the first man to reach the tomb, seeing from the entrance that the graveclothes were lying there. However, unsurprisingly given his more impulsive nature, it was Peter who entered the tomb first.

John confessed in his Gospel that he and Peter had not at the time understood the message of the Old Testament Scriptures predicting that Christ would rise from the dead.³⁵ From this side of the empty tomb, resurrection teaching does emerge from the Old Testament. It is, however, easy to see why the disciples probably believed in a future resurrection of the dead but apparently did not really believe that Jesus would rise from death during their lifetime.

No doubt Peter and John were stunned and not able to fully comprehend what had happened and left. Meanwhile, the distraught Mary returned once again to the tomb. She stood alone, crying. Then Mary looked into the tomb and noticed the two angels. They asked her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”³⁶ Mary almost exactly repeated what

³¹Luke 24:5.

³²Matthew 28:5–6. Matthew immediately adds “as he said,” which is expanded in Luke’s account.

³³Luke 24:6–7.

³⁴Matthew 28:6–7. Mark 16:6–7 is an abbreviation of the words Matthew uses with minimal changes. Mark reports that the angel specifically mentions Peter and with the alteration of one letter in the Greek ends by saying, “as he told you” rather than “as I told you,” presumably referring to prophecies of Jesus reported in both Matthew 26:32 and Mark 14:28. This difference can be explained by the writer shortening or “telescoping” the words. The angel also refers to Jesus having predicted the resurrection elsewhere in his speech. In the above reconstruction of the angel’s words, words from Luke have been inserted where they appear to make the most sense in Matthew’s account.

³⁵John 20:9.

³⁶John 20:13.

she had said to Peter and John. Then, turning around, she saw Jesus but did not immediately recognize him.³⁷ Mary, in her confusion, asked him if he had taken Jesus away, thinking he was the gardener, and a Gospel full of long speeches reaches its climax in two simple but emotionally rich words that introduce the resurrected Jesus for whom creation has been waiting: “*Mary*,” Jesus said. “*Master*,” Mary replied.

The risen Lord of glory made his first appearance not on television or on YouTube, not before kings, not even before the future leaders of his church. Rather, he tenderly greeted a woman who, no doubt, felt that the meaning he had given to her life had been snatched away when he died. Jesus appointed her as a messenger to his disciples and then told her that he would soon ascend to be with God. We can only imagine what awe, wonder, joy, and yet fear flooded Mary at that moment.

Jesus told Mary not to cling to him because he had yet to ascend to God. There is some debate about whether he was referring to the ascension of Acts 1. Or did Jesus make his first return to heaven shortly after this meeting with Mary? Perhaps not delaying him was the reason that he asked her not to hold onto him? This would be consistent with the fact that later on Jesus *did* encourage his disciples to touch him. It would also be consistent with the way in which Jesus seemed to keep appearing and disappearing, as one source has suggested:

When Jesus arose on that first Easter he did so in a glorified, spiritual body that immediately ascended into the presence of God. All of his post-resurrection appearances were appearances from heaven, and the visible ascension forty days later was his final but not his first departure from earth and entry into God’s presence.³⁸

If this view is correct, then this appearance to Mary marks the beginning of a forty-day period during which Jesus makes frequent journeys between heaven and earth³⁹ so that he could fleetingly, but repeatedly, visit his followers.

³⁷We are not told why this was but can speculate that it might be because he was standing in the full light of the tomb entrance, because she was not expecting him, because his appearance was slightly different, perhaps looking older or younger than he had before the cross, or because she was in some way kept from recognizing him.

³⁸Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, electronic edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

³⁹Acts 1:3.

All of Jesus' appearances had a physicality about them. He could be held, he could eat, he could be recognized, and yet he was different somehow. He could pass through walls, his identity could be hidden, and eventually he would ascend into the sky permanently.

News of Jesus' appearance to Mary and the strange events of the morning spread rapidly to his followers, who had scattered and therefore heard different parts of the story at different times during that day. Most did not believe.⁴⁰

Two of them had already left for Emmaus⁴¹ before they had heard the complete story. On the way they met a man, and "their eyes were kept from recognizing him."⁴² These words indicate the real reason why sometimes people were not able to recognize Jesus—they were miraculously prevented from doing so. When the apparent stranger asked them about what had been happening, they were incredulous that he had been in Jerusalem and not known about the death of Jesus. They told him about the empty tomb and appearances of angels and that no one had seen Jesus. They were perplexed and unsure about the stories they had heard.⁴³

Jesus' response is remarkable. Instead of giving them some kind of glorious revelation of himself or performing a miracle, he began a Bible study, saying, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"⁴⁴ He explained to them the Old Testament's references to himself. Later, as he broke bread for dinner, their eyes were opened. The two men suddenly recognized that they had been talking to Jesus, and then he disappeared. Immediately they ran back to Jerusalem to tell the others what had happened.

During that same day, Jesus appeared to a group of women. He urged them in a similar way as the angel had done earlier. He said, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."⁴⁵ Also at some point during the day, Jesus appeared to Peter. This must surely have been particularly emotional for Peter who

⁴⁰Luke 24:10–11.

⁴¹Luke 24:13–35.

⁴²Luke 24:16.

⁴³Luke 24:11.

⁴⁴Luke 24:25–26.

⁴⁵Matthew 28:10. It is possible that this was the same appearance to Mary earlier, which would require that some of the women had either gone with Mary to fetch Peter and John or met her again in the vicinity of the garden.

had recently denied knowing Jesus three times. Perhaps as a result, we are never given details of this private moment.⁴⁶

By the evening of that same day, almost the entire group of Jesus' followers had gathered, including ten of the eleven remaining apostles.⁴⁷ They were exchanging accounts of the day's dramatic events and told the two returning travelers, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!"⁴⁸

These followers had locked themselves in a room for fear of the Jews.⁴⁹ Suddenly Jesus appeared. Since he had passed through a locked door, it is understandable that they feared he was a ghost. Jesus said:

Peace to you! . . . Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. . . . These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.⁵⁰

Jesus also ate some food, demonstrating that his physical body was real. John tells us that during this meeting Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."⁵¹ Then "he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.'"⁵²

Luke's final chapter might leave you with the impression that Jesus immediately led the disciples out to Bethany and that his final ascension into heaven happened on that very same day. Since Jesus tells the disciples to stay in Jerusalem (just like in Acts 1 and unlike his commands of that first resurrection Sunday to go to Galilee), it seems likely that Luke 24 summarizes two different appearances of Jesus, and the first word of verse 50 represents a jump to a later occasion.⁵³

⁴⁶Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5. Cephas and Peter are the same individual and different forms of the same name.

⁴⁷Luke 24:36–43; John 20:19–23.

⁴⁸Luke 24:34. Simon here refers to Simon Peter

⁴⁹John 20:19.

⁵⁰Luke 24:36–44.

⁵¹John 20:21.

⁵²John 20:22.

⁵³This concise method of writing is consistent with the author's style. Luke himself tells us that his Gospel "dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up" (Acts 1:1–2) and then continues to explain that between the resurrection and ascension there was a forty-day period during which Jesus appeared to and taught his disciples.

It was not until eight days later that Jesus returned to his disciples as a group a second time. This time the so-called “doubting Thomas” believed, having been invited to put his hands in Jesus’ wounds. He worshipped Jesus as God, to which Jesus said, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”⁵⁴ Peter later echoed this: “Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.”⁵⁵

A clear theme emerges from each of these reports—the need to believe even when Jesus is hidden from sight. The disciples, having seen the risen Jesus, would be entrusted with the task of sharing the good news with others who would never have had the advantage of seeing him in the flesh as they had. We are not told why Jesus then continued to make further intermittent appearances for forty days, but perhaps as well as teaching them it was to prepare them for the time when he would not physically be with them.

Eventually the disciples obeyed Jesus’ original command to travel to Galilee, where he would again meet them. The journey from Jerusalem to Galilee was not short, so several more days would have elapsed before Jesus’ third appearance to his disciples as a group. John paints an informal, more relaxed scene, in contrast to the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem. Jesus met with seven disciples who were fishing, performed a miracle, and then served them a breakfast he had been cooking. He also specifically recommissioned Peter.⁵⁶

During the days that followed, Jesus appeared to a crowd of five hundred. He made a private appearance to his brother, James, which presumably led to James’ conversion and subsequent leadership role in the church.⁵⁷ Jesus also appeared on a mountain in Galilee and gave the disciples the Great Commission.⁵⁸

Later the disciples returned to Jerusalem, and the ascension into heaven occurred (see Acts 1). Jesus promised they would receive the Spirit and become his witnesses. Then, after Jesus ascended, angels said to the disciples, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into

⁵⁴John 20:29.

⁵⁵1 Peter 1:8.

⁵⁶John 21:1–23.

⁵⁷1 Corinthians 15:5–7.

⁵⁸Matthew 28:16–20.

heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”⁵⁹

There has been much discussion about the ascension. Was Jesus then further glorified? Or, was he glorified at the moment of the resurrection but veiled it for the sake of his disciples? We simply cannot answer this question with the biblical literature, so we will leave it unaddressed, except to say that the resurrection, ascension, and glorification are part of one great movement: Jesus was “raised” from the grave back into the glory of heaven.

CONCLUSION

We have now considered all the resurrection appearances as described in the four Gospels. Although the picture can seem rather disjointed until put together, there is much commonality between these accounts. Jesus met with people when they were alone, with a small handful of people, in a group of twelve or more, and in an assembly of hundreds. He met them in a formal gathering, over a meal, in a home, in secluded countryside, at work, and in the middle of a busy city.

Jesus can still meet people today in all these situations. Although he no longer meets us face-to-face, the reality of his presence remains through his Spirit and the Bible (see John 14–16). Jesus can meet us in every situation we face, just like the disciples. Throughout the rest of church history he has continued to meet with his people, sometimes by surprise, but always to keep his promises: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them,”⁶⁰ and “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”⁶¹

We now face two essential questions that will occupy us throughout the rest of the book: Can we believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ? And, what does it mean to live in light of the implications of that event?

⁵⁹Acts 1:11.

⁶⁰Matthew 18:20.

⁶¹Matthew 28:20.