

## **Holy Week as Recorded in the Gospels**

### **Session #5: Resurrection, Appearances, and Ascension**

Last week, we followed Jesus to the cross, we watched him die, and we left him in a tomb. Today we will look at his resurrection, appearances, and ascension.

#### **The Doctrine of the Resurrection (in general terms):**

“Resurrection” is a blanket term covering three different, but related beliefs: 1. That the soul of an individual is awakened from the sleep of death shortly after death occurs; 2. That the bodies of the dead will eventually be resuscitated in some form at the end of the present world; 3. That the righteous among the dead will be raised collectively, after a Last Judgment, either to an eternal existence on some other plane, or a rebirth in a world which will succeed this one. Resurrection is thus conceived either as an individual experience or as a common eschatological event; either as an awakening from the body or as an awakening in it; either as universal or as selective; either as an inevitable continuance in eternity or as a privileged birth in a new creation. It’s no wonder there is so much diversity of opinion today about the doctrine of the Resurrection!

#### **Resurrection in the Jewish Scripture:**

For most of Jewish history as reflected in our Old Testament, “resurrection” was not a developed doctrine. Not until the Hellenistic (Greek influence in Judaism – late in Jewish history) are there actual references to belief in the resurrection of the dead (Daniel 12:1-2). Passages up to that point which seem to suggest belief in the resurrection are, upon further investigation, hyperbole (for example, Psalm 23 literally ends with “Your house will be my home as long as I live” TEV).

Over time, conceptions of the afterlife began to form. Some Jews came to equate “heaven” with “the Garden of Eden.” Jews came to describe “Gehenna” as the destination of the wicked. Named after the valley outside Jerusalem where it was believed pagans sacrificed their children to the god Moloch, it was also a fiery refuse dump in Jesus’ day. The Jews also came to believe in a place called “She’ol,” the abode of the dead, both the righteous and the unrighteous, regardless of the moral choices made in life, a place of stillness and darkness cut off from life and from God. Both have been mis-translated as “Hell” in many English Bibles. Many Jews today do believe in afterlife similar to the way Christians do, but others say that people continue to live in the memories of their loved ones.

#### **Resurrection in the Ancient World:**

Some pagan cultures around Palestine held belief in a resurrection, at least in some form, most notably Egypt. Some scholars believe that these neighboring cultures may have influenced Judaism’s development of a belief in resurrection. Others see no direct relationship.

#### **Attitude of the Jewish Sects in Jesus’ Day:**

Essenes: The Essenes of Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls) held that, although bodies were perishable, souls endured and ascended upward – the good to the realm of bliss, and evil to a place of torment.

Sadducees: The Sadducees denied the resurrection altogether.

Pharisees: The Pharisees accepted the notion of a resurrection, excluding certain specific categories of apostates. Their view became the dominant Jewish view and is the belief of most Jews today (all Jews today are descendants of the Pharisaical theology of Judaism).

Samaritans: The Samaritans probably did not believe in a resurrection of the dead.

### **The Resurrection in Christian Scripture:**

From the New Testament point of view, the Resurrection of Christ is not, and cannot be, understood as a typical instance of resurrection in general. It is a unique event, and not the type of resurrection believed in during biblical times. It was uniquely the Resurrection of the Messiah. In the New Testament, as in the Old, there are a number of persons who were raised from the dead (Jairus' daughter, the widow's son at Nain, Lazarus, etc.), but these are not "resurrections" in the true sense of the word, they are "resuscitations:" they are brought back to life, but will eventually die again.

As mentioned a moment ago, many in Jesus' day did believe in a general resurrection, but it was either spiritual (soul leaving the body at death), or eschatological (the body or soul raised at the end of the age, perhaps after a Judgment). Jesus' experience was different. His was a bodily resurrection after three days, to live eternally. There are two Greek words used to describe Jesus' body in the New Testament. Before the Resurrection, the word used is "sarx," which means a body like yours and mine, with limitations. After the Resurrection, the word used is "soma," which means a transformed body, without mortal limitations (appears and disappears, passes through walls, etc.). The Resurrection of Jesus was God's unique action in salvation history.

### **Easter Morning in the Gospels** (Mt 28:1-10; Mk 16:1-8; Lk 24:1-12; Jn 20:1-10)

Belief in the Resurrection of Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. On this one tenet, all other beliefs rest (although there are sincere differences of interpretation about how literal we should take the reports of the Resurrection: i.e. Christ "lives" in and through "his Body," the Church). But, however the event is interpreted, it is undeniable that it radically transformed the lives of his followers – from a frightened group cowering in hiding – to apostles on fire boldly preaching Jesus' Resurrection to the very people who, only weeks before, had put Jesus to death!

There seems to be several different strands of tradition that developed around the events of Easter morning. It is notable that there is no account of the actual Resurrection of Jesus, only of an empty tomb and reports of appearances (the rest is left to faith). While all four Gospels agree that Jesus was raised from the dead, the details of the events of that morning and the subsequent appearances of the risen Christ vary greatly. For instance:

- Were there three women who went to the tomb (Mark), two (Matthew), or one (John)?
- Did they arrive before dawn (Matthew and John) or after dawn (Mark)?
- Was the stone rolled away after they arrived (Matthew) or before they arrived (Mark, Luke and John)?
- Were angels present (Matthew, Mark and Luke – yes; John – no)?

Yes, there are many inconsistencies – but the basic fact remains the same ... the tomb was empty!

### **The Appearances** (see handout):

While the Gospels are unclear about the chronology of events, it seems that before Mary was able to give her report of the empty tomb, there had already been a number of sightings of Christ. In all, he appears 10

times to the disciples to reassure them and to instruct them to continue his work in the world. But as with the tomb accounts, there seems to be some confusion on the details of the first appearances. Matthew and John have Jesus appearing first at the tomb; Mark puts him elsewhere. And while Matthew, Mark, and John describe appearances in Galilee, Luke seems to limit Jesus to Jerusalem.

The writers also differ in how they describe the risen Jesus. Luke and John depict him in concrete, physical terms; He eats; He invites doubting Thomas to touch his wounds. Paul's risen Christ who appears to him on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9), is more spiritual than physical (this is after his Ascension, so perhaps that explains the difference?). Whatever happened, however these encounters were experienced, they changed the lives of all those involved.

### **Appearances in Matthew** (Mt 28:11-20)

Matthew is the Gospel that tells about the concern of the authorities that the Disciples might steal Jesus' body and claim resurrection. You will remember that Matthew tells us about the soldiers placed at the tomb. He completes the story by reporting that the soldiers were bribed to say that the Disciples had stolen the body while they slept. Then, in the only appearance recorded by Matthew, Jesus and the eleven meet at a mountain in Galilee, and Jesus gives them "The Great Commission" (Mark also has a version of this – Mk 16:15-18 – see notes below concerning Mark).

### **Appearances in Mark** (Mk 16:9-20)

The most ancient manuscripts of Mark's Gospel contain NO appearances of the risen Christ at all! The women are told by the angel that Jesus is risen, and are given instructions to tell the Disciples to go to Galilee and there they will see him, but the manuscript ends with the women being "distressed and terrified. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." The most ancient manuscripts end there.

However, there is an "old ending" to Mark that is inserted immediately following 16:8 (and before 16:9 which represents another ending). This inserted sentence brings a brief conclusion to Mark without the resurrection appearances.

Other, later manuscripts have added yet another ending (16:9 and following). In this ending, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (similar as in Matthew and John). Then Jesus appears to two disciples (similar to Luke). Then he appears to the eleven (similar to the other three Gospels and the Book of Acts). Finally, Jesus is taken up to heaven (similar to Luke and Acts).

What are we to make of all these variations? It seems some editors thought the ending was not satisfying or complete, so they added material to make it more acceptable. However, I prefer to let Mark be Mark – I love the open-ended way he leaves the reader hanging... as if to say, "Wow, the tomb is empty! What am I supposed to make of that?" We have to complete the ending.

### **Appearances in Luke** (Lk 24:13-53)

In one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible, Jesus appears to two disciples on the Road to Emmaus, and is recognized only when He breaks bread with them. Then Jesus appears to his Disciples, shows them his hands and feet, and eats with them to prove he wasn't a ghost. Unlike the other Gospels, in Luke Jesus tells the Disciples to remain in Jerusalem. Then he ascends to heaven from Bethany (near Mount of Olives), not Galilee.

### **Appearances in John** (Jn 20:11 – 21:25)

As you know by now, John contains a lot of material not found in other Gospels. The same is true for the appearances of the risen Christ. Many of the most beautiful and best loved passages are from John.

John tells the wonderful story of Jesus appearing near the tomb to Mary Magdalene, who thinks he is the gardener – but then he calls her by name, and she knows it is Christ. (This is the setting of the hymn, “In the Garden”). Then Jesus appears to his Disciples and breathes on them the Holy Spirit (John’s version of Pentecost). Thomas was not with them and doubts, so Jesus appears again to the Disciples when Thomas is present and allows him to see and feel for himself. Thomas has no more doubts. Then the Gospel seems to come to a close at the end of chapter 20.

Chapter 21 may be an appendix. It tells of Jesus appearing in Galilee by the Sea. The Disciples had gone back to their fishing trade and were having a bad night. Jesus, a “stranger” to them, tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat and they catch “one hundred and fifty-three” fish. Jesus eats with them on the shore. Then Jesus and Peter have a most remarkable exchange, where Peter is asked three times, “do you love me?” then instructed to “feed my sheep.” The three times may be a three-fold forgiveness for the three-fold denial by Peter. Then Jesus foretells the cost of Peter’s calling, and the martyrdom he will suffer. Finally, Jesus says a curious thing about “the Disciple Jesus loved” (presumably the author, John). He says John will not die until Jesus returns. Then John closes his Gospel by saying that “the whole world could not hold the books that (could) be written” about all the things that Jesus did.

### **Summary:**

There are many uncertainties and questions about the resurrection of Jesus. The Bible does not speak with a unified voice. But one thing is for certain: something miraculous and mysterious happened the first Easter morning, something that shook the very foundations of the world! Perhaps it is fitting that there are so many questions about what happened on Easter morning because now, as then, it is ultimately a matter of faith.

### **Reflection/Closing** (First Corinthians 15:12-23)

<sup>12</sup> But tell me this—since we preach that Christ rose from the dead, why are some of you saying there will be no resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup> For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. <sup>14</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. <sup>15</sup> And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave. But that can’t be true if there is no resurrection of the dead. <sup>16</sup> And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. <sup>17</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. <sup>18</sup> In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! <sup>19</sup> And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.

<sup>20</sup> But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died.

<sup>21</sup> So you see, just as death came into the world through a man, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. <sup>22</sup> Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life. <sup>23</sup> But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back.