

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST



Do you believe it?

Resurrection Fresco in the Chora Church, Istanbul
Turkey

Not one person, in the New Testament, has ever claimed to have witnessed the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Everything New Testament witnesses have to say on this matter are about seeing and talking with the Risen Christ after the resurrection had taken place, and also talking about the empty tomb. So conclusive proof of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not possible, as no human being was present at that moment in time. All we can do is look closely at what the witnesses had to say and experience, which was that - **'beyond the cross Jesus was alive for evermore.'** This boils down to a matter of faith and belief and also, to how credible we think the New Testament witnesses and their stories of the Risen Christ walking among them really are. And for me this is where I want to begin.

EVIDENCE FROM COMMON SENSE.

Here are three reasons why I believe that God raised Jesus:

- 1. JESUS IS REMEMBERED.** Had the story of Jesus ended with his death by crucifixion, it is highly unlikely that the world would have heard of him. At best Jesus would have been a passing footnote in a few Roman and Jewish histories.
- 2. THE DISCIPLES REGAINED HOPE.** The crucifixion left Jesus' leading disciples in a state of crushed

disillusionment. Yet, within six weeks they were enthusiastically proclaiming him as Israel's Messiah. Some decisive experience must have triggered this transformation; and it must have been one which set not only the death on the cross but its connection with criminality and criminal shame and its condemnation by the biblical Law in a wholly new light. Only experiencing the Risen Christ as a reality in their lives, during those few weeks after his death on a cross, can explain this regained hope among his followers.

3. CONTEMPORARIES FOUND THE DISCIPLES

PERSUASIVE. The disciples, from the start, preach the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And, they were willing to face ostracism, persecution and death for preaching the resurrection. This was clearly no conspiracy to deceive. They were convinced of the truth of their claims, and able to convince others. They have convinced me also. They speak the truth.

We now turn to the evidence of the resurrection found in the New Testament.

This evidence can be found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, in the four gospels, in the book of the Acts

of the Apostles and in certain passages in Paul's other letters.

EVIDENCE FROM THE FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS.

The first letter to the Corinthians was composed by Paul around the years 52 to 54. This is less than 25 years following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul writes: *"I handed on to you as of first importance what in turn I had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve."*

The words 'handed on' and 'received' refer to the same words used whenever instructing new converts to the way of Jesus Christ by the disciples. Here, Paul is quoting the instruction he had himself received about Jesus' resurrection after his own conversion that happened sometime between the years 33 and 36. Paul then used these same words when instructing the Corinthians. These verses take us back to no more than five years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul is using an instruction formula which could easily

be described as a very early form of creed of belief about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ used by the disciples when making converts to Christ. Paul then follows this up in the first letter to the Corinthians with a list of resurrection appearances by Jesus to five hundred disciples and to James (possibly Jesus' brother) and with all the Apostles before rounding off with the appearance to himself, regarded by him as the validation of his own unlikely apostleship.

EVIDENCE FROM THE FOUR GOSPELS.



The four gospels all have something to say about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But these four accounts are very different from one another, and this is because each gospel writer only wrote about those items of tradition that fitted in with his own theological

presentation within his gospel. Let us see how they differ from one another:

The earliest gospel to be written was **Mark**.

Traditionally Mark obtained much of his material from the apostle Peter. Mark therefore is taking much of the oral tradition from the first Christian generation. Mark contains no accounts of meetings with the risen Jesus - only a young man who tells three women who have come to anoint the body that he has risen. The youth shows them that the tomb is empty and commands them to pass on the message that his disciples and Peter will see see Jesus back in Galilee.

Matthew's resurrection material is close in outline to Mark but, elaborates it. Two women come to view the tomb. They see the stone rolled away from the tomb by an angel during an earthquake. The angels appearance terrifies the guards placed at the tomb by the Chief Priests and the Pharisees. The angel tells the women that Jesus is risen, shows them the empty tomb, and sends them to the other disciples with the same message, found in Mark, that they will see Jesus in Galilee. On their way, however, the women now meet Jesus himself, who repeats the angel's instructions. The

guards report to their superiors, but are bribed to keep silent and to say the disciples stole the body while they were asleep. This, Matthew adds, is the story spread 'among the Jews to this day'. Meanwhile, the Eleven (the twelve apostles less Judas, who killed himself) go to Galilee, where Jesus meets them, though even they can hardly believe. The gospel ends with Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations, and assures them of his presence with them in power until the end of world history.

Luke also has an account of the resurrection based upon the stories from the first Christian generation. And, the gospel also contains some highly distinctive features. The visit of the women (the number of women is not given) to the tomb find the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. But this time two men in dazzling clothes (angels) tell them that Jesus is risen, but there is no message about going to Galilee, only a reminder that Jesus said all would happen as it has. The women report to the Eleven and the other disciples, but are not believed. An additional note, not in all manuscripts, tells of Peter running to the tomb to check.

Luke's special material now follows: Two disciples walking home from Jerusalem to Emmaus are joined by a stranger who asks them what they are talking about and, on hearing the news of Jesus' death and the report of the empty tomb and the angels' message, then proves to them from the Old Testament that all this was in fact the destiny of Israel's Messiah. On reaching Emmaus the disciples invite the stranger to lodge with them for the night. Over supper he breaks and blesses the bread, and they suddenly recognise him as Jesus, whereupon he vanishes. At once they rush back to Jerusalem, where they find the other disciples and learn that Jesus has appeared to Peter. Jesus then materialises in the midst of them, so that they panic and think him a ghost. He invites them to touch him and discover for themselves that he is not, and then eats some fish to prove the point. Jesus then explains the scriptures and prophecies relating to himself and to the mission of the Church, he commands them to wait in Jerusalem for the power promised by his Father. He then leads them out to Bethany, blesses them, and ascends into heaven, after which they return in joy to Jerusalem. Luke is the only gospel writer who insists all the Resurrection action

took place in Jerusalem. In the gospel Luke makes all the action happen in one day and this contradicts what Luke then went on to write in the Acts of the Apostles. Also Luke's emphasis on Jesus eating food is a bit strange and yet some of these themes reappear in John.

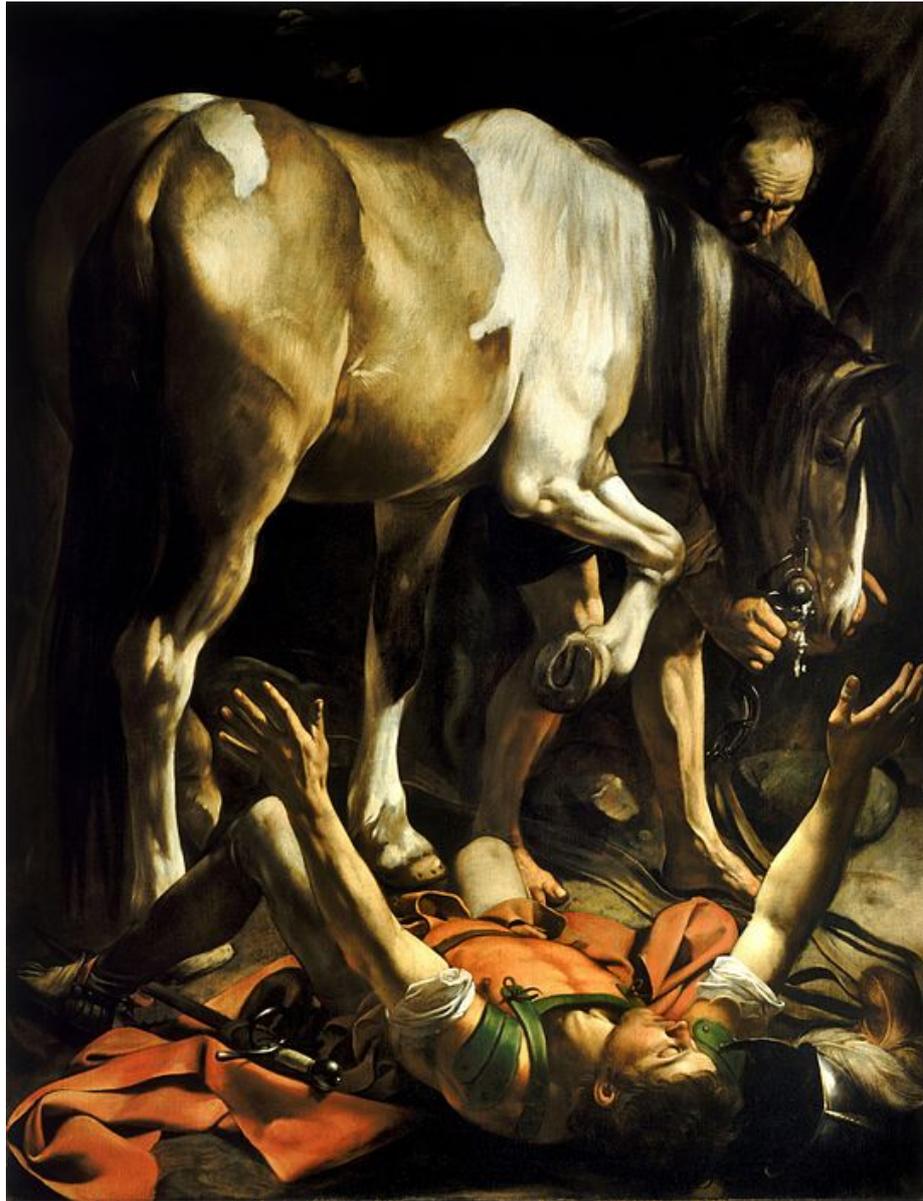
John's resurrection stories are placed both in Jerusalem and in Galilee. In the Jerusalem stories it is Mary Magdalene alone who discovers the stone rolled away and assumes from this that the tomb is empty. The fact is confirmed when Peter and the 'beloved disciple' who run to the tomb, enter, and find only the grave-cloths. Then they leave but Mary remains and is the first to encounter the risen Jesus, which she relates to the other disciples as Jesus has commanded her to do so. That evening Jesus appears among the disciples in a locked room and shows them the marks of his wounds. He endows them with the Holy Spirit and grants them authority to give or withhold the forgiveness of sins. The apostle Thomas, absent on this occasion, refuses to believe until he too has seen and felt Jesus. A week later Jesus appears again, and Thomas is convinced. Jesus pronounces a blessing on

those who believe without such proof, clearly meant by John to be taken as referring to future converts.

There then follows two further connecting stories which took place in Galilee. Peter and six other disciples have returned to Galilee and have resumed their old occupation as fishermen. After a night without success a man on the shore tells them where to cast their nets and they catch a huge shoal. (There is a similar story set during Jesus' ministry as told by Luke.) The beloved disciple realises that the man on the shore is Jesus, and on reaching land they find a breakfast prepared at which Jesus presides.

The second story concerns a private talk which Jesus has with Peter after the meal. He draws from Peter a threefold avowal of love, thus wiping out Peter's threefold denial before the crucifixion, and gives him a threefold charge as pastor (shepherd) of Jesus' flock. Jesus then utters a veiled prophecy of Peter's martyrdom, but mysteriously refuses to disclose the future of the beloved disciple.

EVIDENCE FROM THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES.



The conversion of St. Paul on the road to Damascus by Caravaggio.

This book is the second part to Luke's gospel. Written by Luke who for some time was a companion to Paul. Knowing Paul well, Luke relates the story of the appearance of Christ to Paul three times within the book of Acts. But in the first chapter Luke leads us to

Jesus' ascension into heaven. Like the ending of his gospel, Luke stresses the command to the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they are empowered by the Holy Spirit for their mission. Unlike the gospel, Acts speaks of a period of 'forty days' after the first Easter Day, during which the risen Jesus met with the disciples and gave them further teaching.

We now turn our attention to the three stories relating to the conversion of St. Paul. This was on the road to Damascus where Paul experiences a brilliant light which temporarily blinds Paul and he hears the voice of Jesus addressing him. The three accounts are not consistent in every detail. In one account Paul's companions hear the voice, but in another account they do not. There are also discrepancies over what is supposed to have been said to Paul. In one account Paul is told to simply go to Damascus and await further instructions, which are never made explicit. In another account the Lord's command is the same, but Ananias, the Christian disciple who baptises him, tells him that God has chosen him to witness to the whole world. And in the third account, Jesus himself tells Paul of his commission to preach to the Gentiles. But what is stressed, in all three accounts, is that this experience

was an encounter with the risen Jesus in person, however different from those in the gospels.

EVIDENCE FROM PAUL'S OTHER LETTERS.

St Paul's letters are often in agreement with the story of Paul's conversion as disclosed in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul reveals a moment of radical disclosure which completely altered the perspective of his faith, and convinced him that Jesus was Messiah and living Lord, and reveals God as saviour of Gentiles as well as Jews, and Paul kept on preaching these disclosures. Paul met Christ on the Damascus road and this led him from the Pharisaic party to the Jesus party within Judaism. Paul states in his letter to the Galatians that the gospel he preaches came to him by direct revelation from Jesus Christ, and that God, who had destined and called him for this very purpose.. 'was pleased...to reveal his Son in me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.'

In his letters Paul has much to say about the Resurrection life that Christians themselves can expect. In his letter to the Philippians Paul says that at his

second coming Jesus will 'transform the body of our humble state to conform it to the body of his glory'. 'Glory', in Paul describes the divine light, the vision of God. Paul writes more about this in his first letter to the Corinthians where he describes the continuity of the person between our life here and in the Resurrection world, and the amazing transformation which our being will undergo. The Resurrection life is one that decay cannot touch, that is spiritual not physical, that is not earthly but heavenly. You can clearly see in these descriptions of heavenly life the deep impact the Damascus road experience and his encounter with the Risen Christ had on him. Paul's evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is very strong indeed.

A SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE THUS FAR.

I have been trying to sequence the events of the Resurrection from all the differing accounts above. I have been trying to solve a puzzle, but the puzzle feels like a jigsaw with many missing pieces. We cannot lay these Resurrection accounts alongside one another and

come out with a reconstructed order of events of what actually occurred.

However, the jigsaw pieces that do fit together are described below and there is much agreement within all the New Testament accounts and are therefore strong evidence:

1. The first reports that something had happened

came from the women disciples. The first hint that something had happened is picked up by a woman disciple or women disciples who visit the tomb early on the Sunday morning. The names vary somewhat in the four gospel accounts, but Mary of Magdala is in all of them.

2. The stone had been rolled away. There is agreement in all four gospels that they found the circular stone blocking the entrance to the rock tomb rolled back, leaving it open.

3. The body had gone. Further investigation, by the women or others, shows that the body is no longer there.

4. There were meetings with the disciples.

Subsequently there are a number of meetings of various disciples with Jesus alive. (Mark records only that there was to be such a meeting, and later

editorial attempts to complete the gospel seek to supply this deficiency).

- 5. Some disciples were uncertain.** All the gospels state or imply doubt, hesitation or frightened inability to respond by some or all disciples present on one occasion or another. 'they, (11 apostles) worshipped him but were uncertain.'
- 6. The encounters with Jesus were not simply visions.** Jesus is heard to speak, and in a majority of cases dialogue is mentioned or implied.
- 7. There is ambiguity as to the mode in which Jesus is present.** By touch and sight Jesus seems to have a physical body like that of other people, but that body is also said to be capable of appearing and disappearing, even in a locked room. However there are two puzzling passages - The first is one in which Jesus asks to be given food, so that he can prove that he is not merely a ghost, as he proceeds to do by eating a piece of cooked fish. The second is Mary Magdalene's meeting with Jesus in the garden of the burial, when it is implied that she attempts to touch him but that Jesus forbids her, because, 'I have not yet ascended to the Father.'

8. There are varied accounts of Jesus'

appearance. Most reports suggest that Jesus was clothed, but they report different guises at different times - as a traveller; as a gardener; as a casual passer by.

9. The witnesses fail to recognise Jesus at first.

There is often non-recognition at first encounter, even those who knew Jesus well may fail to identify him.

10. The location of the meetings with Jesus varies

between accounts. Luke sets all meetings in or around Jerusalem. Matthew and Mark have Galilee and John places significant meetings in both Jerusalem and Galilee. (Yes ,Matthew does have Jesus appearing to a woman on the first Easter morning, but this only reinforced the message from the angel of a meeting in Galilee).

MY CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.

To me it is unthinkable that the Christian Faith would have come into existence if the disciples had not believed that they had experienced the presence of Jesus, raised from death and raised to glory. I believe

and see daily that our experience of the risen Lord is at the heart of Christian faith.

The Gospel accounts are quite short and they differ in detail, but convince me because of their agreement that the tomb was found to be empty, by some female disciples. Jesus appeared to both female and male disciples over a period of a few weeks, after which these physical appearances ceased. Jesus had appeared in different forms and was not impeded by locked doors, but could be touched and could consume food. He seemed to be both physical and spiritual. Paul continues this when he stresses that the resurrection body will be quite unlike our spiritual bodies, though there will be some causal connection between them.

To those who think there is no reality other than this physical world, the resurrection must seem an impossibility. But for those who think there is a God, a supreme spiritual reality that is the cause of the whole physical universe, it will seem obvious that there is a spiritual realm as well as a physical realm. It will seem possible that such humans might live in a spiritual realm after their physical deaths.

The Resurrection vindicated and validated Jesus as chosen by God to be both the image and act of God in human history. The Resurrection also discloses God's final purpose for human lives and for the whole creation, that they and it will be renewed and transformed in a full spiritual union with God. This reveals the true spiritual basis of all physical nature.

Yes, the Resurrection can seem a very strange story, but it is illogical to limit what God can do. Yes, Jesus lived and died in Palestine, but if we stop his biography there we cannot make sense of the experience of countless Christians since his death. Jesus is alive today. He is our contemporary. He is near us and knowing him makes a real difference to our lives. I end by quoting a line from the Revelation of John: **'Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, and I am the living one; for I was dead and now I am alive.'**

Ian Blakeley

The following books have helped with this work:

'What Anglicans Believe.' David L Edwards.

'Christianity.' Keith Ward.

'The Faith of a Christian.' John Austin Baker.

