

THE RESURRECTION ACCOUNTS

MARK 16

The women are the link between the events around the burial of Jesus and the brief account of his resurrection.

16: 1-8. The same women who follow the body to where Joseph has it buried, then make preparations for its anointing. They return to the tomb on the third day and experience the shock of their lives! First of all, the stone, which was exceedingly large, has been rolled away. Second, when they enter the tomb they see a young man dressed in a white robe (an angel?) Sitting there. He tells them that the crucified one has been resurrected. He tells them to go and tell the disciples. He also tells them that Jesus will appear to them in Galilee where he has gone ahead of them "just as he told you." But how do the women respond to this shocking and amazing news? "So they went out and fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for".... In the original version, the sentence is left incomplete. Translators have completed it with words such as this "for they were afraid."

It's as if the ending is left open-ended, in anticipation of further developments in the story. It's as if the ending is but a beginning of the next chapter in the life of the disciple community, a life that will be as unbelievable as the story of Jesus itself. For fear, terror and amazement will give way to transformation, boldness of conviction and courage to follow Jesus all the way.

Clearly, without this kind of ending, without the resurrection, there would be no gospel, no good news story to tell, and no church to tell it.

What does the resurrection mean? It means Jesus' way is blessed as the way of God to us. It is also blessed as our way to God – "deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." The cross is that point of conflict between the demands of love in our lives and all the fear, frustration, selfishness, egotism, insecurity - all those things that become obstacles to those demands. Against our limits and anxieties, our temptations, conflicts and humiliations, Jesus invites us to receive forgiveness in order to forgive, to receive divine attention in order to be attentive to the life of others, to receive grace in order to be gracious, kind and generous. The resurrection is God's "yes" to the world in spite of the "no" of the world to God and in spite of the "no" of God to the evil in the world. God says yes, and God finds ways to make yes real in our lives and through our lives into the world.

How will the story of our lives live this all out?

MATTHEW 28

In AD 25, nobody had heard of Jesus. In AD 50 there are riots in Rome because of him. By AD 65, his followers are being persecuted by the emperor himself. If the crucifixion was intended to squash the movement Jesus started, it was an abysmal failure even though it had all the makings of being a success. Why was it a failure? For the biblical testimony without a doubt, it is because Jesus was resurrected. His resurrection not only started something new and unprecedented in this world, it transformed a small group of scared and scattered followers into powerful missionaries inspired to live and die by Jesus' gospel.

28: 1-10 – The Resurrection of Jesus

Matthew's account of the resurrection, unlike that of Mark, adds what many would consider mythological elements. There is a dramatic earthquake, an angel swoops down and moves the large stone opening the tomb. He tells them to go tell the others that Jesus is raised and to go to Galilee where he will meet them. Several points need to be made here.

- 1) Any astonishing event in Jewish story-telling involves angels. So, Matthew is clearly speaking to a Jewish audience as much as to a Gentile one. The presence of an angel would not be surprising or unusual or unnecessarily "mythological."
- 2) People then, like people today know that dead people don't just rise from the dead. It's outside lived human experience. So, the fact that the women are both excited and afraid (and later the disciples who meet Jesus in Galilee on a mountain are full of both joy and doubt) makes perfect sense. Even if we saw a live person whom we saw dead earlier, we would question whether it was the same person.

The Resurrection, then, is something altogether new in history, in time, in human lived space. It is God's miracle and action telling the disciples and us that even though the world destroyed Jesus and even though God seemed silent and absent when he was dying on the cross, the truth is God has now vindicated Jesus and all he taught and did. God's transforming reality is now in the world as a seed that is growing and spreading. But this seed is now dependent on Jesus' followers to spread.

28: 11-15 – The Priests and the Guards

Of course, Matthew is giving us information that makes perfect sense about the religious leaders and the guards. Given that Jesus had spoken about his resurrection, they want to ensure that the body is watched and guarded after death. But clearly, this plan fails as the guards are upstaged. By whom? It can't be women, can it? What would cause fear and terror in them, or who would have the stealth and skill to move a large stone, remove a body, and all while well-paid guards slept? The religious leaders compound their guilt in having Jesus killed by paying the guards to spread false rumours, rather

than investigating what happened themselves to see whether there was truth to what the guards said. Clearly, they are not interested in the truth, only in securing their power.

28: 16-20 – The Great Commission

In the different gospel accounts Jesus appears to the disciples both in Jerusalem and in Galilee. Here in Matthew it is in Galilee that he commissions his disciples. He does this on a mountain, and this is consistent with the gospel's account of where Jesus offers his teaching (sermon on the mount) and where he is transfigured. Jesus has achieved God's new initiative to forgive/reconcile/renew the world to God. Now his followers are commissioned to implement this achievement in creating communities where forgiveness and reconciliation become the means to overcoming and transforming human relationships broken by conflict, injustice, misunderstanding and grievance.

LUKE 24

Luke's story does not end, of course, with the death of Jesus. For Luke, the disciples' encounter with the risen Lord is the critical event that sends them out into the world. The book that began with assurances that the writer's material is based on eyewitness accounts (1:2) now concludes by emphasizing the experiences of those who witness the resurrection. Indeed, as Luke's gospel draws to a close, Jesus sends the disciples to be witnesses themselves to all nations.

24: 1-12 – The Resurrection of Jesus

The first accounts of the resurrection, speak of an empty tomb. What could be made of an empty tomb? For those who don't believe in Jesus resurrected, the empty tomb speaks of Jesus' body taken somewhere else or stolen. The women who come to the tomb, though, encounter two men (angels?) who remind them of what Jesus himself predicted would happen. The women are identified by name and this is important. They would be part of the early church and would be the source of this story. If only one of them saw the two men and told the story, it could be questioned. But the fact that all of them tell a similar story makes it far more compelling.

The disciples, understandably, don't believe the women's story. How could they? It's totally unbelievable, regardless what Jesus would have said. They still haven't seen Jesus. However, Peter runs to the tomb and does, indeed, see that it is empty. Jesus body has not only been moved, but all the wrapping around his body has been removed as well. What could this mean?

24: 13-35 – The Walk to Emmaus

This is an encounter between Jesus and two disciples on the road unique to Luke's gospel. The disciples don't recognize Jesus. How could they? Even though he looked familiar, the last time they saw Jesus he was mutilated and then dead. Clearly, he looked quite different now. Also, they could not imagine Jesus to be alive, so whatever this stranger looked like, their minds could never imagine it could be Jesus. The

recognition comes from other things. First, the stranger helps them understand that even though this is not how they expected redemption would come to Israel, the suffering of the messiah became part of the plan and it was a plan already foreseen by various prophetic scriptural references. The stranger helps them re-learn the story of Israel with a crucified and resurrected messiah becoming the culminating point.

Secondly, they recognize Jesus as they are sharing a meal which becomes Holy Communion. For all those who would come after, the sharing of Holy Communion would become an experience of Christ being present, just like for those first disciples.

Immediately, they leave and return to Jerusalem to tell the others. When they come to Jerusalem to tell the others, they discover that Jesus has also appeared to Peter. They now begin to believe the women's story that Jesus is, indeed, risen.

24: 36-49 – Jesus appears to His Disciples

While they are going back and forth in wonder and excitement recounting what they have experienced, Jesus comes among them. He speaks words we also hear in John's gospel account, namely: "peace be with you." They needed to be assured, relieved of their fear and their doubt. He invites them to touch him, especially where nails and spear would have made wounds. He also eats in front of them so that they see he is no ghost. Clearly, many would question whether Jesus was really resurrected in physical form. This account is intended to answer such questioning definitively. Jesus is different, yes. But he is also the same. He is spiritual, yes. But he is also flesh and blood.

Jesus also commissions them to proclaim his message and his redemption. They will receive spiritual power to do this with confidence and faith. He will go away physically so that he can come back to be with them spiritually as Holy Spirit. Only as Holy Spirit can he be with them always and inside them wherever they will be.

24: 50-53 – The Ascension of Jesus

In this account, Jesus leaves them within a day it seems. In the first chapter of Acts, we're told he is with them 40 days before he ascends, teaching them and encouraging them. Pentecost will come on the 50th day after Easter morn when the Holy Spirit comes upon them and empowers them to be the church.

JOHN 20-21

With Chapters 20-21, the gospel turns to the beginning of the rest of the story ('early on the first day of the week'). With Jesus' resurrection everything changes for followers of Jesus even if the world hasn't changed. Now they are living in the resurrection with death being a mere sleep or transition within a larger eternity in communion with God.

20: 1-10 - THE EMPTY TOMB

As in all the gospels, Mary Magdalene is the first to arrive at the tomb. Unlike the other gospels, however, here she comes alone.

Unlike Lazarus who comes out of the grave wrapped in burial clothes, the empty tomb contains the clothes already removed, indicating some divine action in removing them. As in the other gospels, the empty tomb itself is a reason for at least some to believe. In this case, the beloved disciple believes on the basis of the empty tomb alone without having yet seen Jesus. Moreover, unlike the other gospels in which Jesus had spoken of his resurrection from the dead before his crucifixion, in John's gospel, he never tells them this will happen, and hence, the surprise.

20: 11-18 - MARY IN THE GARDEN

Mary's weeping and lack of expectation indicates her ignorance and lack of faith, even after the angels have addressed her. Jesus' encounter with her indicates the importance of Mary as the first witness to the risen Christ. Also significant is his request that she not touch him (indicating that perhaps she had already touched him). Why Jesus makes this request is difficult to know. Is it perhaps the need to distinguish the earthly and heavenly dimensions of reality? Or perhaps, the few who are permitted to touch Jesus (like Thomas) would not represent the many who will be called to believe without seeing or touching the risen Christ.

20: 19-29 - THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THOMAS

Unlike Luke in which the Holy Spirit descends upon believers at Pentecost, here Jesus bestows the Holy Spirit on the disciples immediately. Also, Jesus himself gives the Holy Spirit further identifying the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus as much as it is the Spirit of God. With the giving of the Spirit also comes the giving of a peace not of this world (John 14), and the commission to service (as the Father has sent me, so I send you). The word apostle means one who is 'sent.' From this time forth, the disciples are also 'apostles.'

Thomas is one of those who needs physical evidence to believe Jesus is raised from the dead. Jesus gives him what he wants, and this giving of Jesus provides all of us who are reading the gospel, a clear indication that it is, indeed, none other than the crucified Jesus who is resurrected (he still has the marks of the nails and the spear). But Jesus also speaks of those who will be called to believe without seeing or touching.

20: 30-31 - THE FIRST ENDING

All that is given us in the gospel is meant to be signs and testimony to Jesus as the beloved Word of God made flesh. And the Word was made flesh because God so loved the world he wanted to save the world from its darkness and lostness.

21: 1-14 - THE FISH MIRACLE

Peter and the beloved disciple are key characters in the gospel as opposed to James and John who are key players, along with Peter, in the other gospels. The miracle of the multiplication of fish and the breakfast Jesus shares with the disciples reminds us of the feeding of the 5,000. The fact that Jesus eats with them also provides a further sign of the physicality of the risen Christ.

The sons of Zebedee are also mentioned here for the first time in the gospel (James and John) why? Is it to indicate that the beloved disciple may be none other than John? Probably.

21: 15-19 - JESUS AND SIMON PETER

Jesus' questions to Peter allow Peter and he to be reconciled and for Peter to find his way again. The 3-fold nature of the questioning indicates the need to undo the 3-fold denial of Jesus by Peter. The question as to whether Peter loves him, reveals again the mark of discipleship as love. Loving Jesus is loving the Father and loving God is the same movement that moves toward love for each other and love of neighbour. Finally, the reference to lambs and sheep indicate that Peter would be that earthly shepherd of the flock as Jesus is the divine shepherd (John 10).

Jesus also predicts that Peter will indeed fulfil the call to follow Jesus to the death (as he claimed he would before he denied him), and legend has it that Peter was crucified, but crucified upside down by request, as he felt unworthy to die as Jesus died.

21: 20-24 - THE BELOVED DISCIPLE

The beloved disciple is identified as the author of the gospel. It is also indicated that he will live a long life, and hence, write the gospel later in life. Also significant is the clue that the choice of what was included in the gospel of Jesus' life and testimony was intentional to guide the reader toward faith in him as God's love made flesh to redeem humanity.