



## Introduction

The post-resurrection appearances are a bit like those last few revision lessons the teacher fits in before the exams. Jesus won't be able to cover the whole curricula in this period, but needs to touch again upon some of the more important issues; the ones that he knows are most likely to come up; the questions that we are most likely to face in life. Jesus continues to teach his disciples but the methodology has changed. Gone are the crowds and the miracles. The change in methodology is like the change from lectures and practical demonstrations to small group seminars. Without the crowds, everything becomes far more intimate and the deepest feelings of the disciples are touched. Issues are raised for the disciples to reflect upon, and then Jesus returns to unpack these reflections further and help the disciples explore their feelings, understanding and very identity and purpose in life.

But Jesus also needs to let the disciples know how they can find and contact him in the future. The disciples come to a deeper and lasting understanding of what their discipleship is really about; an understanding that will resource and sustain them through all of the challenges that they will face as they live out that faith and, in most cases, die for that faith.

The Old Testament writers sometimes use the image of a valley to make a powerful point both within their narrative and this style is also found within some of the psalms. We descend down one side of the valley and, on ascending the other side, notice the mirror image of the issues we have explored on the way down. The issues appear to be similar, but the journey across the valley has changed the perspective that we have of those same issues. Perhaps this is because we are looking down as we descend into the valley, but as we ascend the other side we are looking up.

As we read of the resurrection appearances, from Easter Day until the ascension, we will start with the narrative of the empty tomb, the absence of the physical Jesus and a message from the angels. As we reach the other side of the valley we conclude with the account of Jesus' ascension. Again there is the absence of the physical Jesus and a message from the angels but, in between, everything has changed and the disciples have a very different understanding, a very different faith and have been changed in other ways by their encounters.

In the Christian year Advent is a time of preparation for Christmas and Lent prepares us for Easter. Those who observe these seasons of preparation usually find that the more serious that you are in your preparation, the more you are able to enter into, appreciate and celebrate the festival that follows.

Easter, where through the passion, crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus achieves the victory on the cross that earns our salvation, is the pinnacle of the church year. The season of Easter ends with the ascension, closely followed by Pentecost. The church year then continues through what is often, and I believe unhelpfully, referred to as 'ordinary time'. A thesaurus suggests the following synonyms for the word 'ordinary': normal, commonplace, usual, regular, everyday, conventional, average, familiar. Given the absence of the big special Christian festivals, periods of preparation and public holidays, we may feel that these words are suitable replacements for the word 'ordinary', but the word



'ordinary', in respect of 'ordinary time', comes from 'ordinal numerals'; the way in which the different Sundays are allocated a number, either before or after a key church festival, to identify them.

If we take seriously the post resurrection accounts, then 'ordinary time' should be far from ordinary; it should be extraordinary. It should be a time when we should expect to encounter the risen Jesus and recognise him afresh, and respond to him in new and exciting circumstances. With the knowledge that Jesus has achieved salvation on our behalf I believe that the period from Easter until Pentecost should rightly be considered as a time of preparation. Easter is the pinnacle of what Jesus has done for us, but how we live out our discipleship during the rest of the year should be the pinnacle of our response to Jesus. It is through the post-resurrection appearances that Jesus prepares us for living out our faith after he has ascended. If you have been using spiritual resources during Lent, then the season of Easter might not be the obvious time for individual or group study of this material, but there is a lot of opportunity between Pentecost and Advent, when you may wish to explore what this material offers.

The post-resurrection narratives begin and end with the absence of Jesus. There might well be times, either within your own spiritual journey or when you look at society and the world, when Jesus appears to be absent or distant. I invite you to journey across this valley, with the disciples and consider their thoughts, feelings and discoveries and how these insights might help us as we both live out the Easter hope within our lives and sustain the vision and of the risen Jesus and seek to find Jesus again during those times when Jesus may appear to be distant or absent. This resource can be read as it is, but it has been structured so that it can be used over a five-week period, with six reflections and questions each week for individual consideration or group discussion. The hope is that the material assists you as you live out your own faith and encounter the risen Jesus anew within our changing world.

**Stuart Buchanan**

## **1 The empty tomb**

'Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.'

Except that isn't really how Easter Sunday begins. The first words in John's account are not 'He is risen', but 'They have taken the Lord' (John 20:2).

The powerful accounts of the Holy Week events climax in Jesus' trial, then the torture and agonising death on a cross on Good Friday, followed by the numbness of Holy Saturday. But Easter Day starts with a final torment; the numbness of Holy Saturday gives way, initially, to the emptiness of the tomb; a sense of despair and of incomprehension and confusion. Christ's body appears to have been taken. Every culture develops traditions and activities with which to try to help cope with the grieving process; one of ours is arranging the funeral. For the women who visit the tomb on Easter morning, the task will be preparing the body with spices. Because we have something that we need

to do, with these activities and arrangements, we can allow activity to distance us from the full emotions of loss and grief. The women arrive to fulfil the necessary tasks, but cannot do these as the body has gone.

But there is an additional depth of despair here. In our imagination, we begin to enter into the agony of those who don't know where the body is. We sometimes hear of horrific stories of people, particularly children, who have been abducted and murdered and, although the murderer has been caught and convicted, the murderer refuses to reveal the final resting place of the victim. The friends and family continue to mourn, but struggle to find closure because they don't have a body to lay to rest. There is no grave and there is no site where the ashes were spread or scattered.

But with a leader, such as Jesus, the body being taken resonates with current trends that attempt to deny that an individual or a movement or culture ever existed. The terrorist's body is buried at sea, or in an unknown grave, so that his follower's cannot find a location as a focus for their remembrance of the individual. Take away remembrance and you eventually have forgetfulness, the hope is that the person will eventually be forgotten.

Colonialism saw whole people groups virtually wiped out, particularly in the Americas; often this was caused more by disease than by deliberate action. From time to time we hear stories of the discovery of ancient civilisations, but because the site has long been forgotten, the people of the civilisation have also been forgotten. The twentieth century saw attempts to destroy whole ethnic groups; the Armenian people during World War I and the Jewish people during World War II. Before commencing his genocide against the Jewish people, Hitler was able to look back and ask, 'Who remembers the Armenian genocide?'<sup>1</sup>

We also come across what is known as cultural vandalism. In recent years the Taliban destroyed the Buddhist cultural heritage in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Daesh (also known as ISIS, IS or Islamic State ) destroyed some of the pre-Islamic cultural heritage of Iraq and Syria. Further back in history European countries have tried to destroy the cultural heritage of countries they have fought against or conquered. If there is no body or grave, or no people group or cultural history left, it can become as if the person or people group never existed. It becomes not just death, but annihilation; the person or people group are soon forgotten. Given that the victors usually write the history, then people and cultures are easily deleted from popular history.

So before we proceed to meet with the risen Christ, let us journey with the women to the tomb. Christ has died. Despite what he had said about rising again, this seemed so far outside of the realms of possibility that his followers hadn't even begun to imagine it could happen. As they journey towards the tomb, they believe that they have a tomb with a dead body in it. They still have the example of the life Jesus had lived and the narrative of his life can be written down, as can his teaching. Examples of his life and his teaching will be remembered and passed on to future generations; he will be remembered by many as a great prophet and healer.

But the empty tomb has the potential to change all of this. In a generation or two Jesus will be forgotten. It will become as if he never existed. As we stand with the women in the empty tomb, and



before we prepare to meet with the risen Jesus, we need to ask ourselves two questions: what difference would it make to me and my life if Jesus hadn't risen? What difference would it make to me and my life if Jesus hadn't lived or if his life and teaching had been forgotten and I knew nothing about him?

Although the risen Jesus will soon reveal himself to the women, and they will realise that the Lord wasn't taken, we can easily find in our own lives that we can experience 'they have taken the Lord' moments. We will return to this theme later in the book, but some initial thoughts to indicate what I mean. For many years we have usually been part of our local Churches Together Good Friday March of Witness. Good Friday is the most solemn and sacred day of the Christian year. Until quite recently most of the shops were closed on Good Friday, the roads were almost empty and the pavements were deserted. It was very easy and safe for a large group to navigate from the church at one end of the high street to the church at the other end. Then Good Friday became just an ordinary bank holiday with the shops open; the roads and the pavements suddenly became busy.

For the first few years the police kindly escorted our procession so that we could walk along the high street with the traffic held back. After a few years the police decided they didn't have the resources to do this and we were on our own, caught between the shoppers on the high street and the patience or otherwise of the bank holiday drivers on the road. Witnessing to Jesus' death could sometimes involve reflecting upon our own mortality!

I mention this change of attitude to Christian festivals and practices as one example of a big change in recent decades. For the first three centuries after the resurrection, Christians were a persecuted marginalised minority. Then Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and Christians became a privileged group in society. This led to a very close relationship between church and state that we refer to as Christendom, where each affirmed and defended the other. When the Roman Empire ceased to exist, the European nation states continued to have this close relationship between church and state. Although there are some state occasions where the church has an important role, particularly centring on royal events, this strong relationship has weakened over recent decades, and Late Christendom or Post-Christendom are the terms often used to describe the current situation.

In the United Kingdom, the number of those who would identify as Christian continues to decline. Figures from about ten years ago would suggest that whilst about a third of the population could be described as churched, meaning that they had some contact with church and knowledge of Christianity; another third could be described as unchurched, having no meaningful contact with church or knowledge of Christian belief and practice; and the final third could be described as de-churched, being those who had originally had some contact and understanding, but no longer did so. We can all probably think about those from our own congregation who have lost their commitment to Jesus and who have drifted away. Given this recent rapid change in society, it is easy to feel that 'they have taken the Lord'.

We, too, can easily find ourselves missing the awareness of Jesus within society and the respect that there had been for Christians. It becomes easier to question our own Christian understanding and



belief. As we try to make sense of Late Christendom we need to reassure ourselves that Jesus wasn't preparing his followers for Christendom, that wouldn't happen for another 300 years. In the post-resurrection appearances, Jesus was preparing his followers to be part of the marginalised and persecuted pre-Christendom church. If we look afresh at these post-resurrection appearances, we should find that he will also help prepare us to recognise and follow him in an era when we might feel tempted to say that 'they have taken the Lord'.

**Reflecting on the questions of what it would mean for you if Jesus hadn't risen and also if you had never heard anything about him, what are the implications for you when you affirm that Christ has risen?**

### Notes

1. Anglican Consultative Council, *Out of the Depths* (2016), p. 94.

## 2 Christ our Passover

The New Testament is rich in imagery, symbolism and parallels from the Old Testament. This is particularly true with the incarnation and Easter narratives. The events of Easter take place over the period of the Passover feast, so we are expecting these parallels. At Passover, with the symbolism of the blood of a lamb on the door posts, God freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. At Easter, with the death and resurrection of Jesus, we can say that through the blood of the Lamb, God frees us from the slavery of sin.

The imagery of Christ as our Passover is perfect. Writing this section during Easter week 2020, I am not surprised to find that the Old Testament readings in the lectionary for Morning Prayer are those telling of the Hebrew people escaping Pharaoh, and being led into the wilderness for 40 years. Today's reading was the destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea (Exodus 14:15-31), which concludes with the words: 'So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.' For two different reasons, I feel very uncomfortable with the fact that the default canticle during the season of Easter, in the Church of England Morning Prayer, is the Song of Miriam, which reiterates and celebrates this slaughter of the Egyptians. First, the violent understanding of God revealed here doesn't sit easily with the God of love and forgiveness revealed in the life of Jesus, but this tension is too big an issue to try to address within one section of this book. Instead, I will focus upon my second reason.

For how long did the Hebrew people fear and believe in the Lord? I know that as I journey with the Hebrew people through the Exodus narrative, I will find plenty of occasions when they cease to believe in both Moses and the Lord and will be disobedient and complain bitterly.

I think that the sin that the Old Testament prophets speak out against most is idolatry. I know that the Hebrew people, as they journey through the wilderness, will decide that they want a more straightforward god, one made in their own image that reflects the world's values, rather than God's values, and they will then create and worship such a god in the form of a golden calf. Within the



worldview of the time, victory is the total humiliation and annihilation of the enemy. The victory over the Pharaoh's army is victory in the world's eyes but, as far as believing in and fearing the Lord, it's a rather short-term victory.

Fortunately, in Morning Prayer, there are two alternative canticles provided. The refrain in the Song of Solomon affirms that 'many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it' (Song of Solomon 8:7). The victory here is the sacrificial love which cannot be quenched. The other canticle on offer is A Song of the New Creation which states, 'Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters' (Isaiah 43:16). This victory is the victory of eventual safety and a clear path to be followed. Both of these, I believe, give a more helpful perspective of the victory achieved through Jesus, our Passover, compared with the military-type victory of Exodus 14. Passover isn't an instant victory; instead it is a lengthy journey with obstacles, doubts and setbacks before reaching the promised land.

The 40 years in the wilderness, after the Passover, were when God prepared Israel for the promised land. Their thinking was much influenced by the ways of the world, and they were very happy to worship a worldly view. God gave them the Law to reorientate their perspective from the ways of the world to the ways of God. In our Christian imagery the wilderness is the place of discovery, as such it is also the place of temptation and wrestling with God and discovering God's will; the wilderness is the time of preparation for what follows. We see the parallel between Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, being prepared to enter the promised land, and Jesus' 40 days and nights in the wilderness after his baptism, preparing him for his public ministry. Based upon Jesus' wilderness experience we have the 40-day period of Lent as our preparation for Good Friday and Easter.

But if Christ is our Passover, I feel the need for another period of preparation. Just as Israel needed such a period of preparation to fully understand the meaning of Passover and prepare to enter the promised land, I need a period of preparation to better understand Christ as Passover and prepare for Ascension and Pentecost and a life without the presence of the physical Jesus. Jesus needed the preparation period to prepare him for his ministry. We need another preparation period to prepare us for our ministry.

As I journey with the disciples through the gospel accounts of Jesus' post resurrection appearances, I will see the same questioning and slowness to learn, the same tendency to try to create God in their own image and the same need for time to take on board what the new Passover is about and to be prepared for what life without the physical Jesus will mean; the need to be prepared for Pentecost and life after Pentecost. I believe that we, with the disciples, need a time of preparation and reflection to digest what the resurrection appearances are saying to us, who the resurrected Jesus is for us and what his resurrection really means for us.

The events at the tomb, on Easter Day, will present us with a long, slow unveiling of the mystery of Jesus' resurrection. Perhaps, there is a sense in which we want it to be immediate, so that we can exclaim that 'He is risen', and get on with eating our Easter eggs and resuming whatever it was that we gave up for Lent.



The events unveiled in the post-resurrection appearances contain a lot of uncertainty, doubt, questioning and a gradual coming to understanding and faith. We can feel that if we don't rush to shout, 'He is risen', then it is because we are a doubter and don't have enough faith. But I feel that if we rush too quickly to shout, 'He is risen', then it might be because we haven't fully grasped the full implications of what 'He is risen' means. Through the resurrection God has won the victory over sin and death, but victory is a concept that we usually try to understand in worldly terms. We need to be able to see victory as God sees it. As Paul will go on to say:

*Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

1 Corinthians 1:20-25

**Apart from sin, what exactly do you feel that Jesus has freed you from?**

### **3 He is risen**

The most usual gospel readings for Easter Day are John 20:1-18 or Matthew 28:1-10. Both have the women visiting the tomb, finding it empty and meeting angels before meeting with Jesus himself who tells them to go and share the good news with the disciples. Before Jesus appears to Mary Magdalen in John's account, Mary goes back to the disciples to tell them of the empty tomb. John wins the race to get to the tomb first, but Peter is the one brave enough to first enter the empty tomb. The two disciples see nothing other than an empty tomb and the wrappings from Jesus' body. They return to their homes before Mary then meets with two angels who speak to her and she then speaks to a man. She assumes she is speaking to a gardener, but then realises that she is speaking to Jesus himself.

In both accounts Jesus has been met with and recognised and the good news of the resurrection has been shared by the women with the disciples. In our Easter services we can go ahead, without any doubt, to celebrate the good news of the resurrection and know that the good news has been shared, by the women, with the disciples. We can sing our great celebratory Easter hymns, but we don't need to ask whether the good news is being believed or not. We can leave such questions for a week when the gospel reading will probably be about Thomas not believing at first, but then seeing the risen Jesus himself. But did the disciples actually believe what the women shared with them that first Easter morning?

In answering this, it is helpful to look at the accounts in both Mark and Luke. Depending upon your Bible, you may well realise that we have a problem with the end of Mark's gospel. Most Bibles will

explain that the original text ends with Mark 16:8 with the suggestion that Mark's concluding paragraphs have been lost. Some Bibles will offer two alternative endings. Although these replacement verses date back to about the time of Mark, New Testament scholars would argue that, because of their style and use of vocabulary and grammar, neither could have been written by Mark himself. As such, the final, added, verses of Mark might collaborate what another gospel is saying, but I wouldn't want to base any argument (such as not being hurt when picking up dangerous snakes, Mark 16:18) on verses that appear only in this added section of Mark.

Mark's original text ends after the angel has told the women that Jesus has risen and instructs them to tell the disciples to go and meet with Jesus in Galilee. But it concludes that they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. The longer and more usual added ending of Mark includes Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalen. She goes and tells the disciples about this appearance, but they would not believe her. In addition there is a reference to what must be Luke's road to Emmaus story, of Jesus appearing to two of them who had been walking in the country. These two go and tell the rest, but they don't believe them. It is only when Jesus appears to the eleven and upbraids them for their lack of faith and stubbornness that they believe.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus doesn't make an actual appearance until the story of the road to Emmaus. It is the angels at the tomb who explain that the tomb is empty because Jesus has risen. The women remember how Jesus had told them that this was all necessary and to go and tell the disciples, but these words appeared to the disciples as 'an idle tale and they did not believe them' (Luke 24:11). Peter did go to the tomb to explore what had happened. He looked into the empty tomb and saw the linen clothes and he went home amazed. The two that meet with Jesus on the road to Emmaus have obviously heard the women's account of the empty tomb and the message they had passed on from the angels, so by then there is some questioning, but no certainty. The certainty among the disciples only begins in Luke's gospel when those who saw Jesus at Emmaus report back to the disciples and find out that Jesus has also appeared to Peter (Luke 24:34).

In both Mark and Luke we read that the disciples did not initially believe the women's account; either of their meeting with Jesus or them seeing the angels and the message from the angels that they passed on. Returning to Matthew's account, nothing is said about how the disciples respond to the good news that the women tell them. The disciples do go to Galilee and they do meet Jesus there. Again, with John's account no mention is made of how the disciples respond to Mary's message. We do read that on the evening of that day Jesus did reveal himself, within the locked room, to ten disciples (Thomas being absent), showing them his hands and his feet and they rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

The four gospel writers have written their accounts in different ways. We will be aware that they would have had different sources to base their accounts upon and that, by the time they were writing, they would be aiming their message at different groups of people, so any divergence in their accounts can be expected. A common factor within their accounts is the long, slow process that was involved in the disciples accepting the reality of the resurrection, and being able to declare, 'Christ is risen.'





I don't have any problem accepting the truth of the risen Jesus, but I do feel that the dawning of this truth was a gradual process, and all of the gospel writers are keen to make their readers aware of how gradual and tortuous the revelation of the truth was. The women need the appearance of the angels to begin to prepare them for the revelation of the risen Jesus. Then the women, full of excitement about the risen Jesus and the implications of this revelation, need to face frustration and rejection when their testimony is not accepted, but instead it is rejected as 'idle chatter'.

I feel as if on Easter Sunday, when we rush through the gospel accounts and listen to sermons about the victory that has been won, the gospel writers are saying to me, 'Slow down.' Take this amazing revelation slowly, so that you can really enter into and accept the real and deep significance of what you are hearing. I am reminded of a story told as an analogy of a man watching a butterfly come out of its cocoon. Seeing the beauty of the colouring of the butterfly's wings and its perfectly formed body, the man breathes on the cocoon to speed up the process. The butterfly suddenly emerges, spreads those wings in all of their glory, and dies; the process has been too fast for it to survive.

Perhaps with our faith we can sometimes make this happen too. If we reach the conclusion too soon, what we have concluded might not survive. The four gospel writers are taking us on a journey, a gradual discovery of an amazing truth. To digest that truth fully, we need to journey with the women and the disciples at their speed so that we enter into the different emotions and understanding, and gain the gradual realisation of what had happened and of the profound impact it would make upon them and the world. To fully digest that truth and the profound impact it makes upon us, we, too, might need to slow down and journey at a similar speed to the women and the disciples in reflecting on the events and their significance before we, together with all believers, affirm that Christ is risen.

**Was your belief in the risen Jesus achieved quickly or was it a journey? What factors would you identify as having influenced your faith journey?**

#### **4 Angels, intimacy and awe**

But before the meeting with the risen Jesus, the women will encounter the angels (Matthew 28:2-7; Mark 16:4-7; Luke 24:4-7; John 20:12-13). Angels also appear immediately after the ascension, so we find that angel appearances bookend the biblical chapters that we are considering. My mind struggles to conceptualise angels. Despite biblical descriptions, somewhere over the centuries they seem to have had a makeover. I wonder if it is the interchangeability of angels and fairies on top of the Christmas tree that has done it! The popular image of an angel has become female, young and attractive, with wings. In contrast, the biblical image is male, often scary and usually of indeterminate age, even though these angels that we will encounter in these verses will be described as young.

Some biblical angels were used to fight spiritual battles. The idea of a guardian angel suggests the physique of someone able to look after themselves as well as protect the person who they are guarding. Generally the first reaction to encountering angels seems to be fear, giving the impression that they might appear as a bit 'heavy' or thuggish, rather than beautiful. To be fair, the beginning



of the makeover did seem to start quite early in history with the story, recorded by Bede,<sup>1</sup> that in 580AD Pope Gregory the Great saw some fair-haired and fair-skinned slaves in a slave market in Italy, and was told that they were Angles, that is, from what would become known as England. 'Not Angles but angels,' he replied. Angels, although still male, now seemed to be young, blue-eyed blonds.

The main biblical roles of angels appear to be spiritual fighters, guardians or messengers. There can also be a sense in which angels interpret the significance of the events. They are not just messengers, but also explain the deeper purpose of the message and the events which are unfolding. While the angels described in these verses do give messages and explanations, there is no real need for them to do so. Jesus is just out of sight and waiting to meet with the women himself. When we read about the angels after Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:10), they also pass on a message but, again, it is a message that Jesus could have given the disciples himself. Both the angels announcing the resurrection and also confirming the ascension appear to be there mainly to mark a rite of passage in Jesus' life. The same is true with those who announce the incarnation to the shepherds in the fields (Luke 2:8-14).

Finding it difficult to visualise angels, I find it helps me to consider them to be a bit like telegrams. Before a time when everyone had telephones in their homes, let alone computers and smart phones and instant access to texts and emails, the way of transmitting an urgent message was to use a telegram. I've only once sent a telegram; I had no other way of alerting a friend whom I was travelling to stay with that I would be arriving a couple of hours later than planned. As with the biblical accounts of angels used as messengers, the telegram caused great fear; she assumed that the only reason to receive a telegram would be because of bad news about a family member!

Telegrams are hardly used for urgent messages nowadays as we have more modern communication technology; perhaps the same thing has occurred with angels since the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We do still use greeting telegrams to mark certain rites of passage, such as births, weddings and anniversaries. I find it helpful to visualise the angels that mark Jesus' incarnation, resurrection and ascension as being like greeting telegrams that are there to mark an important rite of passage. The presence of these angels shows us that both the resurrection and the ascension are there with similar significance to the incarnation itself, as we will discover as we explore further passages.

How many people witnessed the risen Christ? At the tomb we have two Marys in Matthew, two Marys and Salome in Mark and just Mary Magdalene in John. Luke adds Joanna and other women, but doesn't have them seeing the risen Jesus, only the angels. Luke's account of Jesus on the road to Emmaus mentions Cleopas and another follower; we also have Jesus meeting with the eleven disciples. I would be tempted to say that there were not more than 20 who saw Jesus. Paul, writing well after the events mentions the risen Jesus appearing to James (I assume this is the brother of the Lord) and more than 500 brothers and sisters (1 Corinthians 15:6). John mentions that Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples (John 20:30) and that there are other things that Jesus did (John 21:25); although both statements are post-resurrection, we don't know if they refer to post-resurrection appearances or not, or are just part of his conclusion to his gospel.

We don't know the nature of these other appearances, but the appearances in the gospel accounts are small intimate interactions. Even with all eleven disciples present, the conversations with both Thomas (John 20:27-29), and later with Peter (John 21:15-23), are predominantly one-to-one conversations. Gone are the crowds, the teaching of the masses and the healings. We will read of a Jesus who knows what is going on within people's minds before they can utter the words themselves: a Jesus who knows the disciples better than they know themselves. We, too, are likely to sense a Jesus who wants to meet us intimately and will know us better than we know ourselves. It is good if our reading of these passages can encourage us into a closer, more intimate, relationship with Jesus, but there is always the danger that we lose sight of the sense of awe that the disciples experienced within all of the post resurrection encounters.

It can become quite easy for us to take Jesus for granted and just expect him to be there ready and waiting for us. What we read in these passages is of a Jesus who surprises the disciples when he breaks into their lives again.

With the appearances at the tomb, the presence of the angels creates a sense of awe before Jesus can be identified and engaged with. When Jesus meets with the women in Matthew 28:9, they grasp his feet and worship him, and when Jesus appears before the disciples in Galilee (Matthew 28:17) they fall down before him and worship. Although we can look forward to our intimate times with Jesus, we are reminded that the first response to acknowledging Jesus in our presence should be awe, worship and a sense of expectancy.

**How do you hold together the tension between the intimacy of your relationship with Jesus and the fact that any encounter with Jesus is an encounter with the living God?**

### Notes

1. 'History of the English Church and People', written in AD732

### 5 Fake news?

Although the term 'fake news' is a recent term, the concept has been around for thousands of years. Although they didn't have the added benefit of social media to spread their story, we read in Matthew 28:11-15 that the priests and elders devised a plan to spread an alternative version of events - fake news - suggesting that the reason that the tomb was empty was because the disciples had taken away Jesus' body. Understandably, they needed a large sum of money to spread the fake news, suggesting that the rich and powerful are in a better position to spread stories like this than the poor and marginalised.

Those who spread fake news tend to justify their claims by suggesting that their version of events is the true one, and that the other version of events, the truth, is the real fake news. As such, I need to try to step outside of my Christian interpretation of events and objectively make a decision about which version of events is true and which is false. Strangely, I find that it is when I read through the different gospel accounts, I conclude that no one could really make such a bad attempt in trying to



put together such an inconsistent and unbelievable story as the four gospel writers!

In courtroom dramas, it is when all of the witnesses give exactly the same, well-rehearsed, account of events that you question whether this is really the truth, or whether the story has been fixed to try to make it more convincing. Different people do see events differently and will interpret things differently when they recount them to other people. Surely if the disciples were planning to present people with false propaganda, they could have done a far better job of it. I really feel that the combination of the four gospel accounts is so unbelievable that it must be true!

In all four gospel accounts it is the women who first encounter the empty tomb and it is the women who first meet with the risen Jesus. Within cultural norms and the legal system, a women's word didn't count for anything, and you needed seven male witnesses to prove something and give it credibility. If you wanted to give a believable bit of fake news, it wouldn't have been too hard to have created a story that included seven or more male witnesses. Instead, God challenged the ways of the world by revealing the truth of the resurrection to the women: by making the first apostles, that is, those who are sent, women. God doesn't write his truth to fit in with the ways of the world, but his truth was, and continues to be, deeply controversial.

The next question is why make the story as questionable as suggesting resurrection. If the story was that Jesus hadn't really died, but was in a coma and was resuscitated, then it might have been believable. For one person to be resurrected from the dead was just as unbelievable for people in Jesus' time as it is in our time. When Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus will come back to life, she understands this as referring to the resurrection on the last day (John 11:24). Among the Jews of Jesus' time, the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection, but the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the body; but resurrection was something that would happen to everybody at once as the end times began. Resurrection wasn't for individuals; it was either for everybody at once or it was for nobody.

Then we have the question of the nature of Jesus' resurrected physical body. The resurrected Jesus can come and go as he wishes and enters locked rooms. How recognisable was Jesus to those who knew him? On the Emmaus road Jesus is eventually recognised not because of his physical looks and his wounds, but in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:31). When the disciples were fishing and Jesus was standing on the beach in Galilee (John 21), they did not recognise Jesus physically. It was only when he told them to cast their net on the other side of the boat, and they caught too many fish to haul the net in, that some of them recognised him. Did Jesus really have the scars of crucifixion all of the time? He clearly did when he was revealed to Thomas and the other disciples in a locked room, but the scars weren't the determining feature when he broke bread on the Emmaus road.

I have mentioned that Mark's original ending has been lost, but the other three gospels include different stories from each other. Luke has the Emmaus road and appearances in Jerusalem, Matthew has a brief account in Galilee and John has stories from both Jerusalem and Galilee. You would expect that if the gospel writers were trying to present us with fake news, they would have done a far better job of trying to present their readers with a consistent and believable account.



Interestingly, the early church did consider this. “The temptation to construct one “master-narrative”, or to use one gospel only, was very strong for the early church. The plurality of four gospels, four lives of Jesus, and hence four Christologies, was clearly a problem. Non-Christian critics like Celsus, Porphyry and Julian were quick to point out the differences; the mere existence of several accounts suggested that not one was perfect.”<sup>1</sup> Marcion suggested the exclusive use of Luke’s gospel and Tatian a rewritten, integrated gospel from the existing four. Ultimately, the four gospel accounts were affirmed as appropriate for the canon of the Bible.

I assume by then the reality of the risen Christ, and the impact that belief in the risen Christ was making upon his followers, was so real and obvious that they had no need to try to unify the accounts of the four evangelists to convince anyone with a consistent story, but were able to confidently share the four different interpretations of events that the four evangelists had.

Personally, I find that the simplicity of the gospel narratives adds to my belief in their authenticity. Unlike Matthew and Luke’s nativity accounts, there is no attempt to make connections with Old Testament prophecies. The apostle Paul, almost certainly writing his epistles before John wrote his gospel, interprets the significance of the resurrection to his readers. While John interprets significance in much of his gospel, there is no attempt to interpret the meaning of the post-resurrection appearances in these verses. Writing after the events, the gospel writers will often add meaning to their narrative accounts. None of the gospel writers attempts to do this with these resurrection narratives. All of the post-resurrection accounts come over as unprocessed eyewitness statements that were recorded at the time, rather than as interpretations that were developed at a later stage. Because the accounts feel raw and unprocessed I find them convincing, and so I believe that it was the priests and elders who were trying to spread fake news.

**How do, or would, you respond if people suggested that the resurrection accounts aren’t believable?**

## Notes

1. Richard Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus* (SPCK, 1994), p. 164.

## 6 Encountering Jesus

A common theme running through the Easter Day appearances is that people do not discover the risen Jesus; it is the other way around. In fact, the people involved often don’t really believe that the risen Jesus is there to be discovered. It is the risen Jesus who unexpectedly reveals himself to the people, the revelation usually being a gradual one. With the appearances to the women at the tomb, the presence of the angels creates a sense of awe before Jesus can be identified and engaged with. On the road to Emmaus, the two followers will experience their hearts warming as they begin to recognise Jesus (Luke 24:32). When, a few verses later (Luke 24:37) Jesus appears to the apostles, they experience alarm and fright before experiencing joy. Jesus suddenly, and unexpectedly, begins to burst into their lives.

Understanding Christ as Passover reminds us of Moses and of his story. It is worth reflecting on how God suddenly breaks into Moses's life beside the burning bush (Exodus 3:3). In the Old Testament narrative prior to this revelation to Moses, God had appeared rather distant. Since after the time of Abraham, God had been in control of certain aspects of Israel's history; we see this in the story of Joseph and Jacob's family escaping the famine with the move to Egypt. It is also there in the story of how Moses' life is saved with the rush basket, but there hadn't really been any obvious revelation by God to his chosen people or real relationship between him and his people. God initially reveals himself to Moses through a sudden and unexpected experience of a bush that is burning, but not being consumed. It is after this experience of God that God reveals himself historically as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.

When Moses experiences God in the burning bush, Moses wants to know God's name. God identifies himself as I am. God says, 'I am who I am' (Exodus 3:14); Moses is then told to tell the Israelites that 'I am' has sent him. Instead of using a noun as his identity, God uses a verb; the verb that God chooses is about being. As well as identifying himself with being, God does so in the present tense. He doesn't name himself 'I was', or 'I will be'; God is the God of now, not just a God who existed in the past or might only be expected to be encountered at some point in the future; he is a God who is active now.

For me, this means that God is first encountered as the God of being and of now, and then to be understood as the historical God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The verb 'to know' means both knowledge, experience or relationship. The French use two different verbs for our English verb 'to know': *savoir*, which is head knowledge, and *connaître*, which refers to relationship. There is the danger that if we start with just head knowledge about God, we won't actually recognise him when we experience him.

We seem to have something similar going on with the post-resurrection appearances. Jesus is first experienced and, like the burning bush, the experience is an unexpected one that initially produces shock and awe, rather than instant recognition. The head knowledge about Jesus doesn't help his followers to be able to recognise the Jesus that they have experienced. It is only after Jesus is experienced that he is identified as Jesus. Those who meet Jesus need to make sense of their new experience in the light of their head knowledge about who Jesus is; but it is their experience which will drive this process.

We see something similar earlier in the gospels; the Pharisees, who had so much head knowledge about God, were unable to recognise that same God within the person of Jesus. I believe that this can still be true for us today. If we have narrowly defined who we believe Jesus to be, then we risk finding ourselves unable to recognise Jesus in today's world. In a rapidly changing world, we might expect that Jesus might be experienced in new ways.

Increasingly, we live in a society where people don't have the head knowledge about Jesus but where Jesus still makes himself known in people's experiences. We need to be open to recognising Jesus in other people's experiences, and in our own, and then relate the Jesus who is experienced to the Jesus that we have head knowledge about.



Jesus appears suddenly and unannounced into the lives of those who witness him. Although there is no special formula to make this happen for us, I think the passages we have looked at give hints as to how it might become more likely. The women who had gone to the tomb had gone there to serve Jesus; both Mark and Luke explain that they had gone to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body. We could also suggest that this dedication to him and his memory was a form of worship. The two followers who Jesus reveals himself to on the road to Emmaus are discussing Jesus, who he was and what his purposes were, when Jesus meets with them. I would suggest that although Jesus might break into people's lives in any way at any time, it is when we are worshipping Jesus, serving Jesus and discussing Jesus that we are more likely to put ourselves closer to him and be in a position where he can break into our lives.

Having said that, I feel that it begs the question of whether we do any of these actions with the expectancy that we might actually encounter Jesus in the process. Do we worship Jesus, serve Jesus or read the Bible and discuss Jesus with any real sense of expectancy and anticipation that Jesus will reveal himself to us in new ways? If Jesus is going to break into our lives in new and exciting ways, we need to first offer up these potential meeting places to God in prayer and then enter into these experiences with a sense of awe and expectancy.

**Is the Jesus that you experience always the same as the Jesus that you have read/heard about? How do you hold the two together?**