

RUF Large Group Bible Study
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The Resurrection (Luke 24)²

Luke 24:1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. 2 And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. 5 And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? 6 He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." 8 And they remembered his words, 9 and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. 10 Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, 11 but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 12 But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened. 13 That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, 14 and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15 While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. 16 But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17 And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. 18 Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" 19 And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20 and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. 21 But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. 22 Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, 23 and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. 24 Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." 25 And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. 28 So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, 29 but they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. 30 When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. 31 And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. 32 They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" 33 And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, 34 saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" 35 Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread. 36 As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" 37 But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. 38 And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41 And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate before them. 44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." 50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. 51 While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. 52 And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, 53 and were continually in the temple blessing God.

You may hear things like this: People in the old day, in Bible times, used to believe in things that are crazy, but we now know better. Such fairy tales can take place back then, but we're far too wise and sophisticated to believe in such things now. We're a thinking people, after all. If someone is a Christian, or believes in the resurrection, it must be because it works for him or her. That's fine and all, but there is no real rational explanation to it.

You'll hear this on campus, in the subways of New York, in the coffee shops, in the media, in NY Times bestselling books, in your classes, from the Religious Studies Department on any campus.

And it's terribly persuasive. It makes you feel like a non-thinking person if you actually believe Christianity is true. Like you're an idiot.

So here's what happens to the typical freshman on any campus, and certainly here at OU. Sally Freshman walks onto campus as a Christian. She grew up on a steady diet of either liberal teaching from a mainline church, where she drank steadily but unaware from homilies on Biblical themes, went on mission trips and had a good time in the youth group. Things were fun and service oriented. Nothing was too big of a deal. Or she grew up in a conservative church where she sang praise songs, signed a virginity card, memorized a gospel outline and had a great time at the weekly programs provided by her youth group.

It's tough to be a youth pastor. I'm not picking on them, since it's one of the hardest jobs there is. And 18 year olds aren't exactly known for listening and soaking up information even if it's presented to them.

So there you have it. Sally is basically clueless about the "problems" of her faith, and understandably so. But she 1) meets people who raise serious issues with her naïve outlook, 2) goes to the bookstore and picks up a book about the Historical Jesus thinking that that will help her, and she wants to expand her horizons away from the Left Behind series, so this one looks good, and 3) she enrolls in a Religious Studies class, thinking she might as well get credit for reading the Bible.

She gets blasted.

Here is what she reads:

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² My sources are: *Harmony of the Gospels*, J. Calvin; Tim Keller sermons found at redeemer.com and preached to Redeemer Presbyterian Church; John Piper sermon manuscripts found at desiringgod.org; *The Gospel According to John*, DA Carson; *The Gospel According to John*, L Morris; *Exposition of The Gospel According to John*; A. Pink; *John, Hughes; Getting to Know John's Gospel*; R Peterson; Kistemaker, Blomberg, Wenham, and Boice from their books on Jesus' parables; Blomberg, Carson and Calvin on Matthew; Luther's sermons on these passages.

“For Christian faith to be *faith*, this decision, this risk to believe in Jesus, must be embraced without fear. It cannot be bolstered with appeals to certain remarkable historical events that would seem to prove the case. For to insist that the resurrection was a *historical* event is to succumb to the urge to flee from faith, to embrace as true only that which can be proven historically or scientifically. To say, “I believe, because history proves that God raised Jesus from the dead,” is not faith. It is a refusal to have faith. It is unfaith.”³

That might throw you for a loop, especially after it is backed up by this rhetoric:

“When I think of the great decline in membership that my own denomination, like many others, has experienced over the past twenty-five years, I wonder how many people just wandered away because they had given up on finding a place for their views in the church and assumed that organized religion was simply not for them. Why remain committed to an institution that makes you feel like it is a sin to think?”⁴

Sally is confused, especially since thinking isn’t exactly what she’s spent a lot of time doing.

She next hears this hypothesis (presented in outline form here):

There was a general belief in Jesus’ exaltation milling around in the early church. Some Easter legends developed about appearances and/or an empty tomb.

Mark’s account was written first – short and mysterious, women in fear, no actual appearances of the risen Jesus. Just and empty tomb, which is a late tradition inserted to back up the Easter legends, and an angel. Matthew is next. He has Jesus appearing to the women at the tomb briefly in there, and then he appears to the disciples. His closing words serve to round off his previous motifs.

Several hypotheses about what happens next: At the end of the first century, there are problems with this faith, so there needs to be some “texts” to refute those problems. One problem was whether or not Jesus was really human or did he only appear to be? – Luke and John’s fuller gospels “answer” this by giving him more “body.” Another was the Jesus appearances and empty tomb – how do these relate to the basic belief in Jesus’ exaltation? – invented “ascension” stories,

These stories affirm both the initial embodied resurrection and the exaltation, which is now seen as the second stage. A third issue is that there are rival claims to authority in the church, so who is in charge? – the stories then pit groups and people against each other. Peter and John, the women against the men, everyone against Thomas, etc.

When you add all this together, you realize the gospels don’t tell us really anything about what happened after Jesus died, but they tell us a lot about the early church and its struggle for power and political agendas.⁵

Or to put it another way:

This is the scheme of Rudolf Bultmann, and others who follow him.⁶

1) Christianity began without any belief in Jesus’ resurrection; 2) early Christians began (unwisely, it seems) to use “resurrection” language to speak of Jesus’ spiritual or heavenly exaltation; 3) other early Christians, misunderstanding this to refer to bodily resurrection, began to tell back-up stories about the discovery of any empty tomb (with scatty women as the principal witnesses); 4) Jewish onlookers, anxious about the rise of Christianity, believed these (fictitious) accounts of the empty tomb and began to circulate the story about the disciples stealing the body; 5) yet other early Christians, discovering that such stories were circulating, made up a convenient tradition which traced them back to the priests, the guard and the bribe; 6) this tradition found it’s way into Matthew’s possession, and he separated it carefully into two fragments and wove it neatly inot the closing scenes of his gospel. And all this would have to have happened within the sixty years at the outside, dating Matthew around 90, which is as late as most scholars go; less if the date is earlier, as it might be.⁷

Sally also finds this out:

In *Behold the Man*, by Kirk Kimball, the author writes this: Natural laws are a universal constant which no power ever defies, and that truly supranatural healings are neither valid, nor possible. As previously mentioned, the present work neither affirms nor denies the existence of God, and stipulates only that if God does exist, he never breaks the natural law⁸ for the very reason that is *his own law*.⁹

Following this rubric, Kimball asserts that Jesus only appeared to be dead, when in fact he had gone into a coma. Since he wasn’t breathing he would have been assumed to have been dead (they wouldn’t have checked for a pulse). He was weak and not doing well, but alive when the disciples found him. They would have thought it was a resurrection of sorts and would have said, He’s alive. The myth would have grown from there that he had been dead and now was alive.

Sally is confused. She is struggling. She goes to her Christian friends and receives non-answers. She picks up *The DaVinci Code* to get away from it all, and finds out that Jesus was just a man, that he married Mary Magdalene and had a child with her. That this is all found in several suppressed books, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Peter. That there is huge conspiracy to keep it all covered up. That it’s all a sham.

³ Stephen J. Patterson, *The God of Jesus*, Trinity Press International: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. 1998, 239.

⁴ Patterson, p. 244

⁵ And... The Gospel of Peter – only Crossan, who is albeit loud and vociferous, argues for this. No one else takes it seriously.

⁶ Stephen J. Patterson’s book follows this schema to a t.

⁷ Wright, p. 639

⁸ I would suggest reading CS Lewis’ essay, “Miracles” in *God in the Dock*.

⁹ Behold the Man, Kirk Kimball, Universal Publishers (self published), 2002, p. 189. I was thinking about this today as I watched a police car zoom by. The state makes the speeding laws; they make sense in some fashion, but there is nothing inherent in the universe that says you have to go 35mph down Robinson and not 37 or 40 or even 45. Now, why, when the police officer wants to bust someone for speeding, is that officer allowed to “break” the speed limit. Shouldn’t a ticket be written to the officer too? The analogy is that the one who made the law (or the representative of the law maker) is allowed to “break the law, but we’d have to say that the language of that statement is slightly off.

What is she to do and think? Does a thinking person really have to turn off her brain? Is believing in Christianity an incredibly stupid thing to do?

This paper can't answer all the questions, but it may be a start.

My friend, Russell Hunter is a student at OU and the president of the IDEA club, a group that promotes the idea of Intentional Design in science. He's also a philosopher. He likes to use this phrase: "I possess the metaphysical space." What that means (as far as I can tell) is that he is open to the possibilities. If you aren't open to certain possibilities, then you cannot see them or read the evidence you get. You funnel it through something else. This is also a worldview.

For instance, for centuries people thought that the sun revolved around the earth. This was regarded as a fact. But many, many people had evidence to the contrary. They looked at the evidence but couldn't see what it was saying because they didn't possess the metaphysical space of a heliocentric universe. Such a worldview change took place slowly over time, until it reached a tipping point where things went the other way.

Possessing the metaphysical space in our discussion would mean that you have to be open to the idea of the supernatural. If you are, then we can see the data and try to make sense of it. We may get, and most likely and most usually will get, naturalistic answers. But we may get surprised and get a supernatural one. We just have to see.

But if you are not open at all to the supernatural, then you will never see the evidence in that light. You will have to move it to something else, like our friend, Kirk Kimball, quoted above. Let's give him credit that from that point on he understands the history of it all – that the disciples and the Jews would not have expected him to be alive, resurrected by himself. Their understanding of a resurrection is of a national one, not an individual one. He just wants to explain the resurrection without supernatural terms. On the other hand, no real historian goes this route. Roman soldiers were rather good at killing people, and when given a rebel leader to practice on they would have had several motives for making sure the job was done properly.¹⁰ But he has to come up with something naturalistic to explain it, however improbable that is on its own terms.

Here's the bottom line. What follows is a lengthy discussion of the reasons to believe in a resurrection. But you have to see something first. People back in the first century were just as sophisticated as we are. No one believed in dead people coming to life there and then either. The books of Luke and Acts were written to a person who was probably wealthy and educated. He wouldn't believe in bogus myths and ghosts. And yet, Luke writes to him about something really weird, incredibly strange, unexplainable by any natural terms.

The fact that people didn't believe in this sort of thing is a testimony to its power. You have to grapple with something that has to be explained. People in the first century believed that Jesus was raised from the dead. They did so despite what "normal" would say. They did so based on the evidence. It wasn't like Christianity worked for them, so that's why they tried it out. It didn't work for them. They died. Did Christianity "work for" Stephen, stoned for his faith? Did it "work for" Paul, killed for his preaching? Did it "work for" the Roman Christians sent to die in the amphitheaters to entertain the masses? Did it "work for" the men and women who stayed behind during the plague to care for the sick and dying, knowing that they would therefore die with them?

They believed it because it was true. Paul and the gospel writers keep coming back to one thing – the resurrection. They couldn't shake it. They had to deal with it. I submit that you and I do too. It is no different. We aren't more sophisticated. We may in fact be less so. If we cannot look at the evidence and make a conclusion based on it that is contrary to what our natural minds might think happened, we are blinded by our worldview, no less than the earth-centered universe people.

How might we respond to some of the charges above? I read NT Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, a 700+ book on history, philosophy and theology. What follows has been partially gleaned from him.

He would say we should reconstruct things this way:

Matthew, Luke and John have acquired from Paul and the other early Christians, a particular theology of resurrected humanity, of human bodies being neither abandoned to rot, nor yet resuscitated into the identical sort of condition they were before, but somehow transformed, so that they are puzzlingly the same and yet different. This sort of "transphysicality" goes far beyond anything we find in non-Christian Jewish texts of period. It is perhaps slightly anticipated, but it is not at all prepared for. It stands without historical precedent.

Then, the three evangelists turned this idea of transphysicality into the narratives of Jesus (Matthew's Jesus standing on the mountain, Luke's walking on the road to Emmaus, John's cooking breakfast by the shore) which show no signs of mutual influence but which all possess the same, strange, like-and-yet-not-like characteristic. These evangelists then produced these largely independent and very different stories all avoiding mentioning the analysis of the like and yet not like risen humanity which Paul and others give (that we too will be the same someday), and instead focus on recognition and non-recognition, on the risen body of Jesus doing some things that ordinary bodies do and other things that ordinary bodies never do.

Since this is all happening in the framework of mainstream first-century Judaism, they could have reached for an obvious solution to this, based on Daniel 12, talking about the body being like a shining star. Instead, they have invented stories that are 180 degrees from that possibility so that it appears natural for him, for awhile at least, to do natural and normal things and then leave the ordinary human dimension and go, still embodied, to the heavens.

And... at the same time these three writers all managed to avoid putting in any feature of the theology that would have led them to have created these stories in the first place, the biblical exegesis for these beliefs, and the allusions.

¹⁰ Wright, p. 709

Here is Wright's rejoinder to the Bultmann liberal scheme:

If any historian finds this sequence of events more probable than the one which Matthew offers, I can only admire their ability to believe such remarkable things. But I suspect that if even Rudolf Bultmann were to find himself as a member of a jury he would be more prepared to believe a story like the one Matthew tells than a story like the five or six stage development of tradition that must be told if we are able to declare that Matthew's is impossible.¹¹

The origin of the Resurrection Narratives

Sources and Traditions

Virtually impossible for four sources to tell the same story without using some of the same words, and/or to tell it exactly the same. EX: Think of various writers writing about the Sugar Bowl. Thousands of stories, all having watched the same thing, but with different outlooks on the game. Some stories came out an hour later on the internet, others the next day or week, and some maybe a month later in a magazine. They would all be the same, and all be different. That is what you would expect. But you wouldn't expect someone to report the wrong teams, or the wrong score or a sequence of events that was altered.

Luke probably used Mark, but then told the story in his own way, without really having consulted it too much. Matthew used Mark a little more. The overlaps are places he could hardly have avoided (names, mention of the tomb or short, key sentences) – it is likely that the appearance of literary dependence is an illusion created by a natural overlap of oral tradition. (i.e., you wouldn't call it copying if two articles about the Sugar Bowl had these words in common: football, touchdown, OU, LSU, Bob Stoops, Nick Saban, Jason White, comeback, deflected pass, etc.)

John did his own thing.

“If the evangelists had started off with a lesson, theological, moral or practical, which they wanted to teach, and had attempted to develop ‘historicized’ Jesus-stories to serve as allegories of such lessons, they would not have come up with the kind of stories we have here. It is, in other words, easy to see how strange stories about meeting with Jesus, meetings of a sort which everybody in the church knew did not happen in their own day, could be used for wider purposes. It is impossible to imagine this process happening in the other direction, for four reasons, which we must now examine.”¹²

The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Stories

There is virtually no embroidery from the biblical tradition

The evangelists continually pound on and build up scriptural quotations and allusions, references and echoes.

But not at the resurrection

We are told by Paul that Jesus was raised again “according to the Scriptures.” But what Scriptures does he have in mind? Wright says he can only see four in the last two chapters in Matthew – Gen 2:7 (from 20:22) being the only really strong one.

This would be strange because it would seem to bolster their case if they could say, See look what happened! Just what we expected. And there are passages from Daniel and Macabees at their disposal that they could have used.

The Strange Absence of Any Personal Hope in the Stories

We see in later writings (Paul mostly) the idea that because Jesus was raised, you will be too. The connection between his resurrection and your resurrection, needed because of the church being persecuted.

But not in the gospels. It's not there. If it were written later and backdrafted, why is that absent?

The stories are about the vindication of Jesus, the validation of the messianic claim, and the commissioning of his followers to act as his heralds, announcing to the world its new, surprising but rightful lord. Nothing about personal hope.

The Strange Portrait of Jesus in the Stories

If we understand the picture of resurrection that the Second Temple Jews would have had, and if we are saying like the critical scholars that the stories are a projection of political agendas and evolving theologies, then we would expect something really different than what we get regarding the picture of Jesus presented to us.

Jesus is never depicted as a heavenly being, radiant and shining. These are not at all like heavenly visions – no dazzling radiance, or wreathed in clouds, that one might expect in the Jewish apocalyptic tradition. These are not the kinds of things one would expect if the evangelists or their sources had wanted to say that Jesus had been exalted to a position of either divinity or heavenly glory.

Jesus is almost routinely depicted in these stories as having a human body with properties that are, to say the least, unusual. He ate fish, invited his followers to touch him and see he was real, he appeared and disappeared at will, wasn't recognized but was walking on the road, and in the end was taken up to heaven. In other words, you can't have it both ways. If this was an apology against doceticism, then it is a terrible one. Luke has Jesus doing all kinds of body, real human things, but then he “messes up” and has him appear and disappear, not be recognized and ascend into heaven. Oops.

The Strange Presence of the Women in the Stories

The fact is that the women are not only there in these texts but they are highlighted.

¹¹ ibid

¹² Wright, p. 599

“It is, frankly, impossible to imagine that they were inserted into the tradition after Paul’s day.”¹³ Remember that Paul doesn’t mention it, and we might say that is because he is embarrassed by it, whatever his high view of women he might have.

Even if we say that Mark made up all of his material and did so in the time of the 60s at the earliest, it would be a terrible mistake to have an empty tomb legend created and have it be women be the ones to find it.

Women were not acceptable as legal witnesses. It would be like calling to the stand someone with absolutely no credibility in the eyes of the jury. Like Manson to testify at a murder trial. Or a drunk. People wouldn’t listen (sorry, ladies).

If they could have invented the story with men finding the tomb, why didn’t they?

If their story started off with women finding the tomb, why wasn’t that conveniently and slowly dropped from the story? Other things were changed, why not this one? Where are the solid witnesses who could vouch for the story?

The story the critical scholars tell is this: “It would be good to tell stories about Jesus rising from the dead, so what would best serve our apologetic needs?” And this is what you get? Who is backreading into things now?

We might also add that if the purpose of the texts was to legitimate the church leaders, why don’t we read anything about James, the brother of Jesus? He should have been there as well, if he was such a leader in the church.

What if there is another solution?

By Paul’s day all early Christians believed that something extremely strange had happened to Jesus, the strangeness consisting that though he was bodily alive again, his body was somehow different. Suppose that Paul was providing a theoretical, theological and biblical framework for stories that were already well known – stories, which indeed, he is summarizing when he quotes an already official formula at the start of 1 Corinthians 15.

Suppose the stories in Matthew, Mark and John, though not written down before Paul had written his last letter, were what they were, not because they were a late writing up or a wholesale invention of what post-Pauline Christians thought ought to have happened, but precisely because they were not. What if they represented, with only light editing, the stories that had been told from early on, without offering theories about what sort of a thing this new, risen body might be, without attempting to evoke wider theological themes, without adding the element of hope for one’s own resurrection, without the biblical quotations and allusions that might have done for these stories what was done for so many, so recently in the same books. Supposing that the reason nobody evoked Daniel 12 in the Easter stories was the everybody knew that the risen body of Jesus had not shone like a star? Supposing, wider, that the reason nobody evoked the Old Testament in the gospel accounts of the resurrection was that there was no immediately apparent point of connection between Jesus’ resurrection and the narratives of Jewish tradition? Supposing, in other words, that these stories have the puzzled air of someone saying, “I didn’t understand it at the time, and I’m not sure I do now, but this is more or less how it was.”

The very strong historical probability is that, when Matthew, Luke and John describe the risen Jesus, they are writing down very early oral tradition, representing three different ways in which the original astonished participants told the stories. These traditions have received only minimal development, and most of that probably in the final editorial stage, for the very good reason that stories as earth-shattering as this, stories as community-forming as this, once told, are not easily modified. Too much depends on them.¹⁴

This is an argument for the accounts being chronologically as well as logically prior to the developed discussions of the resurrection which we find in Paul and many subsequent writers. They describe more or less exactly that for which Paul and the others provide a theological and biblical framework and from which they draw further eschatological conclusions: an event involving neither the resuscitation nor the abandonment of a physical body, but its change into a new mode of transformed physicality (this being called by Wright “transphysicality”); that is, an event for which there was no precedent, for which indeed in very precise terms there was no *prophecy* as such, and of which there remained, in their day, and remains still in our own day, no subsequent example for.

The surface inconsistencies of Mark 16:1-8 and its parallels don’t argue for their creation as careless fiction.

Those very inconsistencies argue for their early authenticity from people who weren’t looking to create seamless fiction (I can attest to that from my novel writing), but from eyewitnesses who were passing on oral tradition.

All four agree that:

The key events took place early on the first day of the week on the third day after Jesus’ execution.

Mary Magdalene was at the tomb

Matthew, Mark and Luke agree that another woman was there too

Mark and Luke add others

An unusual stranger, an angel or a near equivalent, spoke to the women

Matthew and John that Mary Magdalene met Jesus

All but Mark that Mary and the others if they are in story go off to tell the male disciples

Luke and John that Peter and another disciple then go to the tomb to see for themselves

From that point, the stories diverge more sharply. But we should not suppose that because the writers cannot agree on how many women were there or the location of the angel appearances, that therefore nothing at all happened.

¹³ Wright, p. 607

¹⁴ All from Wright, pp. 610-611

The stories are answers to the question: Why did early Christianity begin, and why did it take this shape?

The answer is: because the early Christians believed that something had happened to Jesus after his death, something to which the stories in the four canonical gospels are as close as we are likely to get.

The Tomb and the Meetings

1. The world of Second Temple Judaism supplied the concept of resurrection, but the striking and consistent Christian mutations within Jewish resurrection belief rule out any possibility that the belief could have generated spontaneously from within its Jewish context. When we ask the early Christians themselves what had occasioned this belief, their answers home in on two things: stories about Jesus' tomb being empty, and stories about him appearing to people, alive again.
2. Neither an empty tomb by itself, however, nor the appearances by themselves, would have generated the early Christian belief. The empty tomb would alone would have been a puzzle and a tragedy. If it would suggest anything, it would be a grave robbing, which was fairly common. No one in the pagan world would have interpreted an empty tomb as implying resurrection; everyone knew that such a thing was out of the question. No one in the ancient Jewish world would have interpreted it like that either; 'resurrection' was not anything anyone expected to happen to a single individual while the world went on as normal. The disciples were not expecting any such thing to happen to Jesus. Sightings of an apparently alive Jesus, by themselves, would have been classified as visions or hallucinations, which were well enough known in the ancient world. People in the ancient world knew that sometimes people had visions of the dead after they had passed. Though this wasn't nearly as frequent as some writers make it out to be, it was nevertheless a known thing. However, visions of this kind didn't normally involve physical contact, let alone watching the recently departed person eating and drinking.

And think about this. The more "normal" these kinds of visions would be, the more we understand that there is less chance for anyone to think and say what no one ever had said about such a dead person, that he had been raised from the dead. Such visions meant precisely that the person was dead, not alive. Even if several people had such experiences, if the tomb was still occupied by the dead body they would have said to themselves, "We have seen really strange visions, but he is still dead and buried. Our experiences are really no different than the others we've heard about in stories and poems."

The point of the empty tomb stories always was that Jesus was alive again; the point of the appearance stories always was that Jesus was in bodily continuity with the corpse that had occupied the tomb. Neither, without the other, makes the sense that the Christians believed they made.

3. However, an empty tomb and appearances of a living Jesus, taken together, would have presented a powerful reason for the emergence of the belief. From what we know of both the Second Temple context and the beliefs of the disciples about Jesus and his mission, we can be confident that if they discovered that a) his tomb was empty and b) the kept on meeting him in ways which gave every appearance that he was dead no longer, but actually alive, the belief we have studied throughout the first two centuries of Christianity would emerge.
4. The meaning of the resurrection within Second Temple Judaism makes it impossible to conceive of this reshaped resurrection belief emerging without it being known that a body had disappeared, and that the person had been discovered to be thoroughly alive again.

There has to have been a missing body. It will not do to suggest, for instance that because the disciples lived in a world where resurrection was expected, this will explain why they used that language with Jesus. Many other Jewish leaders, heroes and would-be Messiahs died within the same world, but in no case did anyone suggest that they had been raised from the dead. One might imagine other kinds of early faith which could have been generated by events which did not involved an empty tomb. But the specific faith of the earliest Christians could not have been generated by a set of circumstances in which an empty tomb did not play a part.

The language of 'resurrection' and the specific modifications within Jewish resurrection belief which we have seen in early Christianity, could only have occurred if the early Christians believed they had clear evidence, against all of their own and everyone else's expectations, both of continuity between the Jesus who died and the Jesus who was now alive and of the transformation in his mode of embodiment. Appearances of Jesus would have provided such evidence. Nothing else could have done.

5. The other explanations sometimes offered for the emergence of the belief do not possess the same explanatory power.

Alternative Explanations

Cognitive Dissonance

Popular in the 1950s from Leon Festinger, who did a study with people who had a ufo cult in the 1950s.

Huge problems with the study, very small group, faded away rather quickly (a month later), the cult folded

Whatever it was the early Christians were expecting, wanting and hoping for, this was *not* what they said, after Easter had happened. This is why you can't say, "Second Temple Jews who believed strongly enough in a would-be Messiah were bound to say things like that after his death." The reason that the early Christians gave for the modifications of the expected story was not that they had received a fresh private message which had made them realize their mistake, but that something had *happened*, something which was not at all what they had expected or hoped for, something around which they had to reconstruct their lives and in relation to which they had to redirect their energies. They were coming to terms with, and reordering their lives around, dramatic, irrefutable evidence that they had been wrong.

In the 300 years between 150 BC and 150 AD there were many messianic movements that ended in the violent death of the founder. When this happened, the followers had two choices: give up the movement or find another Messiah. The followers of course could go on believing that he was a true prophet (that happened with John the Baptist). But no one believed that the said dead would-be Messiah would be raised from the dead. Clinging to the belief that the recently executed person was after all the Messiah was simply not an option. We don't find this sort of cognitive dissonance in the pages of Josephus; first century Jews seem to have been, in this respect, more hard-headed than twentieth century flying saucer devotees.

A New Experience of Grace – see Wright for this one (I've run out of steam to reproduce it here).

Edward Schillebeeckx, 1970s, continued considerable influence (Patterson's book is like this)

6. It is therefore historically highly probable that Jesus' tomb was indeed empty on the third day after his execution, and that the disciples did indeed encounter him giving every appearance of being well and truly alive.

Absolutely provable? That's not how history works. We're looking for what is highly probable.

Nobody was expecting this kind of thing; no kind of conversion experience would have generated such ideas; nobody would have invented it, no matter how guilty (or how forgiven) they felt, no matter how many hours they pored over the scriptures. To suggest otherwise is to stop doing history and to enter into a fantasy world of our own, a new cognitive dissonance in which the relentless modernist, desperately worried that the post-Enlightenment worldview seems in imminent danger of collapse, devises strategies for shoring it up nevertheless. In terms of the kind of proof which historians normally accept, the case we have presented, that the tomb-plus-appearances combination is what generated early Christian belief, is as watertight as one is likely to find.

7. So how do we explain these two facts, the empty tomb and the "meetings"?

If you discover two pillars of an ancient arch and then carved stones that complete the arch in the grass nearby, you would be satisfied the original had been reconstructed.

If you thought you saw an elephant walking down Main Street, you might assume it was some sort of hoax or that maybe you'd been at the bar too long. But if you heard that an elephant had gone missing from the circus in town, you wouldn't have to take too long to come up with a hypothesis to reconcile what you saw.

If you have a friend who was on one side of the river a few minutes ago, and now is on your side and you know there is no bridge around to cross and that her clothes aren't wet and she can't swim anyway, you might assume she has used some sort of boat.

We make these inferences all the time.

This is the same as what we have with the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus. They fit together. The problem is that, while we know about arches being ruined and found, and elephants getting loose, and people crossing boats with rivers, we have no correspondence with someone who is truly dead becoming alive and well again.

The Christian story of Jesus does not try to suggest otherwise. The early Christian understanding of Easter was not that this sort of thing was always likely to happen sooner or later, and finally it did. It was not that a particular human being happened to possess even more unusual powers than anyone had imagined before. Nor did they suppose it was a random freak, like a money sitting at a typewriter and finally producing All's well that ends well. When they said that Jesus had been raised from the dead the early Christians were not saying, as many critics had supposed, that the god in whom they believed had simply decided to perform a rather more spectacular miracle. This was not a special favor performed for Jesus because God liked him more than anyone else. *The fact that dead people do not ordinarily rise is itself part of early Christian belief.* What happened to Jesus was precisely something new; was indeed, the start of a whole new mode of existence, a new creation. The fact that Jesus' resurrection was, and remains, without analogy is not an objection to the early Christian claim. It is a part of the claim itself.

If this happened, it matters. The world is a different place from what it would be if it did not happen. The person who make the statement that Jesus has been resurrected is committed to living in this different world, this newly envisioned universe of discourse, imagination and action.

In the same way, for someone to say "Jesus of Nazareth" was *not* bodily raised from the dead" is equally self-involving. Such a statement belong within, and reinforces, the universal ancient pagan worldview, the modernist, post-Enlightenment worldview and (no doubt) many other variations or anticipations of both.

I think Lewis captures this well, this idea of possessing a metaphysical space. This passage is from *The Magician's Nephew* by C.S. Lewis. This story goes back to the creation of Narnia, the magical world in which Aslan is the God/Christ figure, a talking lion who has just spoken the world of Narnia into existence. Uncle Andrew is an affable chap, but a bad guy out for himself. He is there with the others. He has just witnessed this creation of trees and animals and talking animals, but he interprets everything completely differently from the others.

"We must now go back a bit and explain what the whole scene had looked like to Uncle Andrew's point of view. It has not made at all the same impression on him as on the Cabby and the children. For what you see and hear depends a good deal where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are.

Ever since the animals had first appeared, Uncle Andrew had been shrinking further and further back into the thicket. He watched them very hard of course, but wasn't really interested in seeing what they were doing, only seeing whether they were going to make a rush at him. Like the Witch, he was dreadfully practical. He simply didn't notice that Aslan was choosing one pair out of every

kind of beasts. All he saw, or thought he saw, was a lot of dangerous wild animals walking vaguely about. And he kept on wondering why the other animals didn't run away from the big Lion.

When the great moment came and the Beasts spoke, he missed the whole point; for a rather interesting reason. When the Lion had first begun singing, long ago when it was still quite dark, he had realized the noise was a song. And he had disliked the song very much. It made him think and feel things he did not want to think and feel. Then when the sun rose and he saw that the singer was a lion ("only a lion," as he said to himself) he tried his hardest to make himself believe it wasn't singing and had never been singing – only roaring as any lion might in a zoo in our own world. "Of course it can't really have been singing," he thought, "I must have imagined it. I've been letting my nerves get out of order. Who ever heard of a lion singing?" And the longer and more beautifully the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring. Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song. Soon he couldn't have heard anything else even if he had wanted to. And when at last the Lion spoke and said, "Narnia awake," he didn't hear any words: he heard only a snarl. And when the Beasts spoke in answer, he heard only barkings, growlings, bayings and howlings. And when they laughed – well, you can imagine. That was worse for Uncle Andrew than anything that had happened yet. Such a horrid, bloodthirsty din of hungry and angry brutes he had never heard in his life. Then, to his utter rage and horror, he saw the other three humans actually walking out into the open to meet the animals.

"The fools!" he said to himself. "Now these brutes will eat the Rings along with the children and I'll never be able to get home again. What a selfish little boy that Digory is! And the others are just as bad. If they want to throw away their own lives, that's their business. But what about *me*? They don't seem to think of that. No one thinks of *me*."

What about you? There is no neutral ground in this matter. You can believe in the resurrection based on the evidence, the overwhelming evidence. Or you can believe that it didn't happen, consistent with the pagan worldview of all other cultures. But not-believing is believing is something else. It has its own worldview that comes with it. In rejecting the resurrection, you are accepting a ton of other things. That may not be as apparent to you.

Are you like Uncle Andrew, one who *refuses to believe*. We would have to say that many, many in the world and even in the time of the early church knew of the empty tomb and heard of the appearances of Jesus and still didn't believe. They may necessary and sufficient conditions, but it still takes possessing the metaphysical space to be open to the idea that Jesus rose from the dead. It takes faith. Belief. Trust. But it still happened whether you believe it did or not.

I end with this poem by John Updike:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
 reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.
It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
 eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His Flesh: ours.
The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that — pierced — died, withered, paused, and then
 regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.
Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
 faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.
The stone is rolled back, not papier-mache,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
 grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.
And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
 opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
 embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.

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