

Chapter Fourteen

JESUS' RESURRECTION

The resurrection narratives in the gospels do not derive directly from the primitive stage when the apostolic testimony was as yet unchallenged by the unbeliever. They reflect a somewhat later period, when the average Christian was aware of the unbeliever's principal counter-arguments against the doctrine of resurrection; namely, that Jesus' disciples had removed his body from the tomb, or that they were victims of visionary or other objectively unreal experiences. The gospels and the tradition that preceded them carefully interwove the data of the resurrection with the replies to these arguments, so that Christians might remain in peaceful possession of their faith.

[*NEW AMERICAN BIBLE* - Footnote to Luke 24:1-53]

The above quoted footnote to Luke 24 makes it clear that the translators, who were intimately acquainted with the most ancient sources still extant, were aware that the various versions of the resurrection are contradictory. They were also aware that the versions accepted as integral portions of the New Testament were written at a later time than the rest of the narratives.

This is especially important to remember given that there were no eye witnesses to the resurrection itself. This means that the development of the resurrection narratives had no firm factual basis. They were statements of faith, rather than fact. (See W. Marxsen, *JESUS & EASTER*, *Ibid.*, for an expansion of these arguments.)

The reference to Jesus' resurrection in the Gospels is solely connected with a resurrection here in this life, three days after Jesus' crucifixion. However, a careful study of this subject unveils a tremendous amount of confusion, conjecture, and contradiction.

MATTHEW'S ACCOUNT

According to Matthew, "*Mary Magdalene and the other Mary*" came to the tomb to inspect it. As they waited there, an angel appeared and rolled away the stone which was blocking the entrance to the tomb. The angel spoke to the women telling them that Jesus had been resurrected. As they hurried away, "*half-overjoyed, half-fearful*," Jesus appeared to them and told them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee where they would see him.

Matthew then goes into some detail about the reaction of the Romans to the resurrection, but says nothing about how the disciples received the news. Here are some of the last lines in the Gospel of Matthew:

When evening fell, a wealthy man from Arimathea arrived, Joseph by name. He was another of Jesus' disciples, and had gone to request the body of Jesus. Thereupon Pilate issued an order for its release. Taking the body, Joseph wrapped it in fresh linen and laid it in his own new tomb which had been hewn from a formation of rock. Then he rolled a huge stone across the entrance of the tomb and went away. But Mary Magdalene and the other Mary remained sitting there, facing the tomb. The next day, following the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees called at Pilate's residence. "Sir," they said, "we have recalled that that imposter while he was still alive made the claim, 'After three days I will rise.' You should issue an order having the tomb kept under surveillance until the third day. Otherwise his disciples may go and steal him and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead!' This final imposture would be worse than the first." Pilate told them, "You have a guard. Go and secure the tomb as best you can." So they went and kept it under surveillance of the guard, after fixing a seal to the stone. After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene came with the other Mary to inspect the tomb. Suddenly there was a mighty earthquake, as the angel of the Lord descended from heaven. He came to the stone, rolled it back, and sat on it. In appearance he resembled a flash of lightning while his garments were as dazzling as snow. The guards grew paralyzed with fear of him and fell down like dead men. Then the angel spoke, addressing the women: "Do not be frightened. I know you are looking for Jesus the crucified, but he is not here. He has been raised, exactly as he promised. Come and see the place where he was laid. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has been raised from the dead and now goes ahead of you to Galilee, where you will see him.' That is the message I have for you." They hurried away from the tomb half-overjoyed, half-fearful, and ran to carry the good news to his disciples. Suddenly, without warning, Jesus stood before them and said, "Peace!" The women came up and embraced his feet and did him homage. At this Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid! Go and carry the news to my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, where they will see me." As the women were returning, some of the guard went into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. They, in turn, convened with the elders and worked out their strategy, giving the soldiers a large bribe with the instructions: "You are to say, 'His

disciples came during the night and stole him while we were asleep.' If any word of this gets to the procurator, we will straighten it out with him and keep you out of trouble." The soldiers pocketed the money and did as they had been instructed. This is the story that circulates among the Jews to this very day.

[Matthew 27:57-28:15]

ACCORDING TO MARK

The Gospel of Mark relates that three women, the two Marys and Salome, went to the tomb just after sunrise. The stone blocking the tomb's entrance had already been rolled away and when they entered the tomb they found a young man dressed in white. He told them that Jesus had been resurrected and was going ahead to Galilee where they would see him. Frightened, they said nothing to anyone.

Mark ends abruptly there. The *NEW AMERICAN BIBLE* then gives us two different endings which may finish the story; one is found in the Marcan gospel and the other in some Greek manuscripts. Neither seems to fit comfortably into the flow of Mark's narration, nor do they agree with one another.

LUKE

Luke indicates that several women went to the tomb. The rock had been rolled back. While they were wondering over the disappearance of Jesus' body, "*two men in dazzling garments stood beside them.*" The men told them that Jesus had been resurrected. The women went back and told the others, but were not believed. Peter also went to check. Jesus then appeared to two of his followers on the road to Emmaus. They did not recognize him until they sat to eat together, whereupon he vanished. When they returned to Jerusalem to tell the disciples, Jesus appeared among them all. They thought that he was a ghost and were frightened. He reassured them and spoke of his fulfillment of the ancient prophecies. Then he led them out near Bethany, blessed them and ascended into heaven.

On the first day of the week, at dawn, the women came to the tomb bringing the spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled back from the tomb; but when they entered the tomb, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were still at a loss over what to think of this, two men in dazzling garments stood beside them. Terrified, the women bowed to the ground. The men said to them, "Why do you search for the Living One among the dead? He is not here; he has been raised up. Remember what he said to you while he was still in Galilee—that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of the sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." With

this reminder, his words came back to them. On their return from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and the others. The women were Mary of Magdala, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. The other women with them also told the apostles, but the story seemed like nonsense and they refused to believe them. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. He stooped down but could see nothing but the wrappings. So he went away full of amazement at what had occurred.

[Luke 24:1-12]

JOHN'S ACCOUNT

According to the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb by herself early in the morning while it was still dark. Seeing that the stone had been moved, she went back and found Simon Peter and the other disciple (described here in the Bible simply as the one Jesus loved but later defined as John himself). She told them: *"The Lord has been taken from the tomb! We don't know where they have put him!"* These three returned to the tomb and Simon Peter actually entered, followed by John. Finding the tomb empty, the two disciples went home leaving Mary still there. While she wept, she saw two angels and then Jesus. She thought he was the gardener until he called her by her name. He told her, *"go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God!'"* She did so.

That evening Jesus appeared to his disciples (with the exception of Thomas, who was missing). He entered, even though the doors where they were meeting in secrecy were locked. He said to them: *"As the Father has sent me, so I send you....Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound."*

A week later he appeared to them again. This time Thomas was also present and was convinced of his resurrection.

John then states that Jesus performed other signs not included in the gospel: *"But these have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God...."*

John finishes with Jesus' appearance to the disciples in Galilee while they were fishing. Like Mary, none of them recognized him at first. It is here that John is identified as being the disciple whom Jesus loved: *"It is this same disciple who is the witness to these things; it is he who wrote them down and his testimony, we know, is true."*

INCONSISTENCIES AND DISCREPANCIES

There are many confusing issues raised by these accounts. How many people first went to the tomb? When was the stone rolled back from the entrance? How many angels were involved? Did Jesus appear at the tomb? How did the disciples react when they heard the

news? Why didn't Mary Magdalene, and later all the disciples, recognize Jesus after his resurrection? How often did he appear before ascending to heaven?

There are too many inconsistencies among all of these narratives. In an event so important to the basic doctrines of the religion, they lead to serious concern. Certainly, if we depend on the New Testament alone, we can never know what really happened.

One especially serious discrepancy stands out: how many days elapsed between the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus?

... "An evil and unfaithful age is eager for a sign! No sign will be given it but that of the prophet Jonah. Just as Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of Man spend three days and three nights in the bowels of the earth."

[Matthew 12:39-40]

The next day, the one following the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees called at Pilate's residence. "Sir," they said, "We have recalled that that imposter while he was still alive made the claim, 'After three days I will rise.'"

[Matthew 27:62-63]

He began to teach them that the Son of Man had to suffer much, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be put to death, and rise three days later.

[Mark 8:31]

According to all four gospels, Jesus was crucified on Friday, and resurrected Sunday morning. This amounts to less than two days, and two nights. The discrepancy is obvious; Jesus was not in the grave *"for three days and three nights."*

There is also some confusion about how early the resurrection could have taken place. In John's narration, it was still dark when Mary Magdalene first went to the tomb. In other narrations, it was after sunrise. In any case, it seems clear that the common Christian idea of the resurrection at sunrise is impossible.

Many Christian scholars believe that the resurrection of Jesus was not "a physical resurrection," but a spiritual one. For example, in discussing states in his book *THE EARLIEST LIVES OF JESUS* (Harper & Brothers, 1961, p. 78):

Origen's position in regard to the resurrection of Jesus, the cardinal and undeniable miracle, is not ambiguous, though it seemed so to literalists in antiquity. There is reason to suppose that he did not regard the resurrection of Jesus as "physical" — but at the same time he undoubtedly regarded it as historical.

THE QURAN'S ACCOUNT OF RESURRECTION

Fortunately, we now possess the first tangible proof regarding, among other things, the resurrection of Jesus. I am referring, of course, to the mathematically authenticated statements of the Quran, the Final Testament. As discussed in the last chapter, we learn from this numerically structured scripture that all the righteous are alive at their Lord. They are waiting in the same Paradise that Adam and Eve were in until just before the Day of Resurrection. On that day:

The horn is blown, whereupon everyone in the heavens and the earth is struck dead, except those whom God wills. Then it is blown again, whereupon they rise up, looking. Then the earth shines with the light of its Lord. The record is presented, and the prophets and the witnesses are brought forth. Then everyone is judged equitably, without the least injustice.

[Quran 39:68-69]

It is from this taste of death that the righteous will be resurrected. Jesus' resurrection will take place, along with everyone else's, on the Day of Resurrection. This is described as a specific eternal day that will come after this world has ended.

According to both the Quran and the Bible, death will be abolished, this world will be terminated and then new heavens and earth will be created:

Then I saw new heavens and a new earth. The former heavens and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no longer.

[Revelation 21:1]

The day will come when a new earth other than this earth, and new heavens other than these heavens, will be substituted, and everyone will rise up before God; the only God, the Supreme.

[Quran 14:48]

The resurrection of Jesus on the universal Day of Resurrection is prominently featured in the Quran. There is just a general reference to the resurrection of all the messengers of God. Jesus is the only messenger to be mentioned by name in connection with that day.

Here is the verse mentioning all of the messengers:

(On the Day of Resurrection) God will gather all the messengers and say to them, "How was the response to you?" They will say, "We know not; You are the only knower of all secrets."

[Quran 5:109]

Immediately following this, Jesus is given special attention (5:110-120). Verse 5:116 specifically refers to his resurrection:

(On the Day of Resurrection) God will ask Jesus, the son of Mary, "O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to the people, 'Idolize me and my mother, as gods besides God?' " Jesus will say, "Be You glorified, I could not possibly say what is not right about me. Had I said that, You would have known about it. You know my innermost thoughts, while I know not Your thoughts; surely, You are the knower of all secrets. I never told them except that which You have commanded me to say: that you shall worship God, my Lord and your Lord. I was a witness among them, for as long as I lived among them. When You terminated my life, You were the watcher over them; You are witness to all things. If You punish them, they are your servants, and if You forgive them, You are the Almighty, the Most Wise." God will say, "This is the day when the truthful will benefit from their truthfulness." They enjoy gardens with flowing streams, wherein they abide forever. God is pleased with them, and they are pleased with Him. Such is the great triumph.*

[Quran 5:116-119]

The asterisk in the above quote marks a statement that is almost identical to Jesus' statement in John 20:17:

Jesus then said: "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Rather, go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God!' "

[John 20:17]

CONCLUSION

The various accounts in the Bible dealing with Jesus' resurrection are so full of inconsistencies that they leave the whole issue in doubt.

The Quran clears up the questions raised by these inconsistencies. It emphasizes that the only resurrection of Jesus will be on the one universal Day of Resurrection, along with every human being who ever existed in this world.

If the righteous do not die (as discussed in Chapter 13), and thus Jesus never really died, it makes sense that he cannot be resurrected until after everyone is struck dead at the end of the world and then resurrected:

The horn is blown, whereupon everyone in the heavens and the earth is struck dead, except those whom God wills. Then it is blown again, whereupon they rise up, looking.

[Quran 39:68]