Jesus Risen: Bodily Resurrection But No Empty Tomb

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The recent controversy about the resurrection of Jesus has proceeded on the assumption that doubts about the historical value of the stories of the empty tomb necessarily entail denial of the bodily resurrection of Jesus as a matter of history. But this is by no means the case. There are good grounds for affirming that the bodily resurrection of Jesus belongs to the earliest Christian preaching. On the other hand, there are equally good grounds for maintaining that the empty tomb is a late element in the history of the Gospel traditions. This may seem very contradictory, but in fact it simply points to the conclusion that the empty tomb tradition has been formed in the light of belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and so should not be regarded as the origin of the belief as is commonly supposed.

I believe that a more satisfactory understanding of the resurrection of Jesus can be obtained by observing a careful distinction between the New Testament statements about the resurrection and the popular stories—including the empty tomb story—in which they eventually found expression. This, as we shall see, includes a refinement of the notion of bodily resurrection which makes the whole idea more valuable theologically, and also does away with the necessity of a crudely literal notion of bodily resurrection, which is inevitable when the empty tomb stories are taken to be straight history. But it is not a matter of denying bodily resurrection as such. It is both possible and legitimate to affirm belief in the resurrection of the body at the same time as entertaining doubts (or at least keeping an open mind) about the empty tomb.

To start, we must ask why anyone questions the empty tomb stories at all. The reason which immediately comes to mind is that it is a miracle which is very hard to accept. So when scholars express doubts about it, it can be put down quite simply to the supposition that they have lost their faith. This makes people feel cheated, because it does seem very hard and unreasonable that those who, by their scholarship, should be illuminating and deepening the faith are apparently using their skills to undermine it. This at once raises a sense of antagonism which cannot possibly advance understanding. Moreover, for the most part it is just not true.

There are in fact two reasons why many scholars are very cautious about miracle stories. The first is theological, that although miracles play a large part in the Bible and Christian tradition, salvation is essentially a matter of the transformation of nature through the work of the Holy Spirit, and this is open and available to all without the intervention of special miracles. Bodily resurrection has to be seen

from this point of view, and can be believed without acceptance of the empty tomb tradition, as we shall see. The second reason is historical. The religious literature of the ancient world is full of miracle stories, and we cannot believe them all. It is not open to a scholar to decide that, just because he is a believing Christian, he will accept all the Gospel miracles at their face value but at the same time he will repudiate the miracles attributed to Isis. All such accounts have to be scrutinized with equal detachment.

Furthermore, it is not only modern people who find miracles difficult to believe. Unbelief is a feature of the resurrection stories in Matthew, Luke and John. Luke represents Paul as faced with a barrage of scepticism from his hearers in Athens (Acts 17.32; cf. 26.8). But it remains true that it is more difficult for us today to believe miracles, because we know that irreversible changes take place at death far more rapidly than was understood in the ancient world. So faith in the bodily resurrection of Jesus demands not merely resuscitation but also the re-creation of the cellular structure of the brain. The miracle required is thus much greater than was formerly realized.

However, none of this takes us to the real reason why the empty tomb story is questioned. New Testament scholars are concerned with the growth of the literature and the ways in which it relates to history. For the Gospels we have to reckon with a long process of oral and written traditions which have been collected and edited and, in the case of John, very considerably recast, quite late in the first century. The letters of Paul have special importance because (if we exclude the doubtful ones like the Pastoral Epistles and Colossians and Ephesians) they have come down to us virtually intact, and we know that they were written between twenty and thirty years after the crucifixion, before any of the Gospels were written.

On this basis there is widespread agreement that the earliest witness to the resurrection is to be found in 1 Corinthians 15.3–7. Here Paul is evidently quoting from an official statement of the Jerusalem church, so that what he says has first-class importance for our purpose. Though the burial of Jesus is mentioned, it is highly significant that the passage makes no reference to the visit to the tomb. For this agrees with the remarkable observation that the fact of the empty tomb is never appealed to by any New Testament writer in order to prove the resurrection, outside the stories themselves. The emptiness of the tomb may be assumed, but it is not made the grounds for inviting belief in the resurrection. This suggests that the proclamation of the bodily resurrection of Jesus lies behind the empty tomb stories, and not the other way round.

According to this passage in 1 Corinthians, the primary testimony to the resurrection is a series of appearances of Jesus, beginning with an appearance to Peter which is referred to in the Gospel stories but not described (Mark 16.7; Luke 24.34; the tradition in John 21 perhaps also preserves an echo of it). As the earliest proclamation does

not make any distinction between the resurrection of Jesus and his exaltation to the right hand of God, it is best to assume that the series consists of appearances of the exalted Lord. It is then highly significant that Paul in verse 8 claims that his own conversion experience is an appearance in the same series. Here, then, we do have an eyewitness, but his own account of what he saw is tantalizingly brief (Galatians 1.16), and we cannot be sure that the story of it in Acts 9 is exactly how he would have described it himself. On the other hand, we do have one eyewitness account of a resurrection appearance, which is not included in Paul's list because it happened many years later. This is in Revelation 1.9–20, where John (probably not the apostle) describes his experience on the Lord's day while in exile on Patmos. Though he uses conventional terms—largely drawn from the book of Daniel—to express it, it was clearly an overwhelming experience.

These are both profound religious experiences, and the same can be said for the appearances to Peter and the rest, in view of the astonishing inspiration and vitality of earliest Christianity which was the immediate result. It seems to me impossible to dogmatize about the nature of these experiences, however. We must leave it open whether the appearance was what one might call 'objective' (Acts 9, for what it is worth, implies not), or was a vision confined to the beholder, or was an intellectual illumination in the sense of a flash of realization of a truth. The second of these possibilities seems to fit John's experience best.

The importance of these appearances is that they triggered off the proclamation of the resurrection. It is at this point that it is necessary to insist most strongly that, whatever had been the nature of the resurrection experience of Peter and the rest, it was a proclamation of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. What they said was certainly in line with contemporary Jewish ideas of death and resurrection. As these were rather varied in New Testament times, our best guide for the earliest Christian preaching is again Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4.13–17 and 1 Corinthians 15, in which the basic ideas can all be matched from Jewish sources. In these passages it is presupposed that at death a person's body stays in the grave while the soul goes to a place of waiting until the general resurrection (like the souls under the altar in Revelation 6.9). Then at the Parousia the bodies will rise from their graves and be reunited with the souls in the everlasting Kingdom.

It might be supposed that the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus, following this scheme, would presuppose that his body remained in the tomb. But this is not so. Jesus is risen 'from the dead', i.e. from the dead people, not just from death. This means both body and soul. The mistake of modern criticism, in particular the Bultmann school, has been to discount the bodily aspect and think only of the soul, which is then not differentiated from the state of the souls of the rest of the dead. But in the crucial statement of 1 Corinthians 15.3–5, which we have already considered, it was 'the Christ' who died and appeared to Peter and then to the twelve. Jesus thus appears as one who occupies the

position of the Messiah at the right hand of God. His soul is not left in the place of waiting, and by the same token it can be assumed that his body is no longer in the tomb. Paul is thus justified in drawing the conclusion that he is the first fruits of the dead (1 Corinthians 15.23), anticipating the reunion of soul and body at the general resurrection. It should be noted that there is in 1 Corinthians 15.3–5 no suggestion that the appearance to Peter took place on the third day. The reference to the third day is part of the theological statement of the resurrection, deduced from Scripture (verse 4) and perhaps partly from sayings of Jesus himself (cf. John 2.22).

But if it is presupposed that Jesus rose bodily from the dead, would not the disciples have gone along to the tomb to see if their impression was correct? Certainly, if they had happened to be in Jerusalem. But we must take seriously the evidence that this was not so. Our minds are so conditioned by Luke's scheme, in which everything takes place in Jerusalem, that it is difficult to imagine anything else. However, it is virtually certain that the appearance to Peter and to the twelve (1 Corinthians 15.5), and very likely the appearance to 'above five hundred brethren at once' (verse 6), took place in Galilee. This is what is actually said in Mark 14.28 and 16.7. This is confirmed by Matthew 28.7, even though Matthew has Jesus appear to the women and give exactly the same message as the angel only three verses later. But Matthew then has the appearance to the eleven in Galilee. This is clearly the earlier tradition, which has been displaced by the Jerusalem tradition in Luke and John. But even John 21, which was added later to the Gospel, is based on the Galilean tradition.

At this point it becomes impossible to avoid some measure of speculation, which I have managed to avoid so far by sticking closely to the earliest strands of evidence. Unfortunately, the beginnings of the church in Galilee are completely suppressed in Acts. But we can at least be sure that Jerusalem had become the headquarters of the Church before the conversion of Paul. It may well be that the list of appearances in 1 Corinthians 15.4–7 marks the stages whereby the Church came into being. If so, the appearance to James (verse 7) should perhaps be connected with the decision to set up the headquarters in Jerusalem, when it was felt safe to do so. At any rate, we know from both Acts and Paul that James had charge of the church there. The appearance to 'all the apostles' (same verse) does not mean the twelve again but the new missionaries who now begin to be active.

We cannot tell how much time elapsed before Jerusalem became the centre, but it would be a mistake to suppose that everything happened with the speed that is suggested by Luke in the early chapters of Acts. In any case, the disciples of Jesus must have kept out of the way for some time, seeing that he had been put to death by the Roman governor as a potentially dangerous leader.

This must be borne in mind as we try to work out the rise of the stories of the empty tomb. It would seem likely that this was connected with the attempt to locate the tomb of Jesus after the return to

Jerusalem. I am assuming that none of the followers knew what had happened to the body of Jesus after the crucifixion because they had all fled to Galilee. This of course means rejecting the story of the burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea. We seem to have begun to slide down a slippery slope, in which everything historical in the Gospels falls. But let us beware of panic reaction. The story of the crucifixion of Jesus is indisputably based on fact, even though every detail is subject to scrutiny. In this case we are concerned only with the empty tomb, and the point is that the account of the burial is part of that story and not separable from it. I suggest, in view of the lateness of this tradition, that there was no precise information available about what had happened to Jesus, but that an empty tomb associated with Joseph was eventually selected as the most likely place of burial. It was in any case an accepted fact 'that he was buried' (1 Corinthians 15.4). But the location had to be an empty tomb because it was a basic conviction that Jesus was risen from among the dead.

From this point we can see the progressive development of the tomb legend. First, and very significantly, it is not allowed to interfere with the primary tradition that resurrection faith began in Galilee. Mark knows the proclamation that Christ rose on the third day (cf. the passion predictions, Mark 8.31; 9.31; 10.34), and has timed his account of the empty tomb accordingly. He also knows that the first appearances were in Galilee, and makes this the substance of the angel's message (16.7). But this fidelity to the tradition is breached by adding to the story the appearance to the women (Matthew) or to Mary Magdalene alone (John). Then the appearance to the assembled apostles is transferred to Jerusalem (Luke and John). By the time that Matthew writes his Gospel, the story is so well established that some opponents of the Christian movement try to refute it by suggesting that the body of Jesus was stolen by the disciples themselves (Matthew 27.64). He counters this with the incident of the guards, a naive elaboration which strains credulity still further.

The special contribution of Luke and John, both writing some forty or fifty years after the event, is to relate the resurrection traditions to the ongoing life of the Church in which it is continually experienced. The walk to Emmaus symbolizes the Church's eucharistic experience of the risen and glorified Jesus, and Luke has correlated it with the Jerusalem traditions. The assembly of the apostles (for which John may have been dependent on Luke, or on a source also used by Luke) reflects the Sunday gathering for the Eucharist. John's appendix (21.1–23), which retains the original setting in Galilee, also echoes facets of the life of the Church. It is at this point that we can see the true value of the Easter stories. None of them provide the grounds for the original proclamation of the resurrection, but they all have value, some more than others, as expressions of the joyous meaning of resurrection faith, which was so vividly experienced in the earliest days. The proper use of these stories, therefore, is in celebration rather than apologetics. They are not a basis for proving the gospel of the

resurrection and, as we have seen, were never used as such in earliest Christianity. But they vividly express that faith, and through them the people of God may share imaginatively in the Easter joy.

Finally, the first Christians were not worried about the nature of the resurrection body, but Paul had to deal with converts at Corinth who found it a real problem. He deals with the matter at great length in 1 Corinthians 15, but also to some extent in 2 Corinthians, Romans and Philippians. In doing so, he introduced two important clarifications. Firstly, he took the point that the physical body moulders in the grave, so that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Corinthians 15.50). But he asserted that at the general resurrection the soul will be newly clothed with an incorruptible and immortal body appropriate to the divine life. This is what has already happened in 'Christ the first fruits' (verse 23), whom he has seen on the Damascus road (verse 8). Secondly, he showed that this transformation is to some extent anticipated already in those who belong to Christ by baptism into his death, because it is the process of renewal and conformation to the likeness of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, as described in Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 4—5. The Parousia with the general resurrection then marks the completion of the process both individually and corporately. Thus Paul frees the concept of the resurrection of the body from the crude literalism of the popular Jewish views, shared by the Galilean fishermen, whose experience of the risen Jesus is, nevertheless, the foundation of the gospel of redemption.

It has been the main contention of this article that the story of the empty tomb arose as a consequence of the gospel of the resurrection, and not the other way round. Those who prefer to hold to the historicity of the Gospel accounts will not, of course, be willing to accept this. But they will have to use their ingenuity to harmonize the discrepancies, and this is a no less questionable practice than the critical procedures which have been used in the above handling of the New Testament evidence.

Those who take this view are likely to accept also the Lucan scheme, which is so neat and well-adapted to liturgical celebration. But that scheme does not accord with the primitive proclamation used by Paul. This presupposes a single act in which Jesus is raised, both in body and soul, from among the dead to the place of glory at God's right hand. Resurrection and ascension are separable ideas, but it is wrong to separate them as successive acts. Moreover, following the lead of Paul, we can conclude that at his resurrection Jesus assumed 'his glorious body' (Philippians 3.21), suited to his status as the exalted Messiah. This view permits (but does not necessitate) the corollary that the physical body of Jesus remained in the unknown place of burial and decomposed in the same way as our own. Those who take this view are not thereby denying the resurrection of the body, whether of Jesus or of the people of God, and it is wrong to suggest that they cannot recite the final clauses of the Creed with a clear conscience. The empty tomb

may be doubted as a matter of history, but the resurrection of the body, which has even now begun in us, is the heart of the gospel of redemption.

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The Poetry of the Resurrection

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This paper is not a systematic examination of the critical problems involved in the Christian understanding of and belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Certainly there *are* problems, arising out of the relationship between an undeniably odd occurrence in history and the continuing claims of religious experience: philosophical problems about what is going on when we interpret the ancient texts which bear witness to the resurrection; doctrinal problems about the variety of understandings of atonement, a Christian theme inextricably linked with the events of Christ's death and resurrection; historical problems concerning the 'facts' of the matter. I cannot claim to have solutions to any of these problems. I simply want to suggest a way of thinking about them and about the resurrection as central to Christian believing which may provide, for some, a useful aid to reflection.

How far is it a proper question to ask whether the resurrection is fact or fiction? Historically, it is such an odd and unlikely event that it might seriously be suggested that 'history cannot establish the facticity of the resurrection'.[1] Furthermore, is the resurrection a 'fact' about Jesus, or his disciples, or ourselves and our experience? Is it simply a fact about the past, or about the present and even the future as well?[2] And if factuality is so difficult to pin down, how seriously should we take fiction? Popularly, it is usually regarded as the opposite of fact and therefore untrue or 'made up'. Story-telling, nevertheless, is a very serious business, and imaginative writing makes serious claims upon us. Iris Murdoch has called the creative writer an *essential* truth-teller and defender of words. For D. H. Lawrence, 'the novel is the book of life. In this sense, the Bible is a great confused novel', while Coleridge identifies the logic of poetry as more severe than that of science, 'more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive causes'.[3] I suggest, therefore, that there is value in regarding the resurrection by the criteria of fictional and imaginative writing, and that poets have often truly discerned the mystery that theologians somehow miss.