

ST CANICES LENT DISCUSSION GROUP MEETING SUNDAY 24 MARCH  
2013

THE RESURRECTION

Reading

\*Matthew ch 27:45-66 &ch 28, Mark ch 15:33-47 &ch 16, Luke ch 23:44-56 & ch 24 and John ch 20 & 21

\* “Jesus, An Historical Approximation” (Pagola) ch 14 (attached)

\* “Jesus of Nazareth” (Lohfink) ch18 (copies of the following parts attached)

The Flight of the Disciples

The Structure of the Easter Experience

The Empty Tomb

World –Altering Expectation

Glossary

“Eschatology”- see attached

“Soteriological’ (aspect of the resurrection)- the saving significance of what was achieved in the resurrection of Jesus

“Christological” (aspect of the resurrection)- having to do with Jesus own identity and life

“Parousia”- visible coming of Christ

Some thoughts for discussion

\*Exactly what was the resurrection?

\*How was the resurrection interpreted by the early Christians?

\*The empty tomb, fact or fiction?

\* Would we have our Catholic faith today without the resurrection?

«Why?» we want to know, and so do Jesus' followers. «Why did God abandon that innocent man, executed unjustly for defending God's cause?» They have just seen him go to his death in an act of total obedience and faithfulness. How could God turn away from him? The memory of the last supper is still engraved in their hearts. In his farewell words and gestures they can feel the immensity of his kindness and his love. How can a man like that end up in *sheol*<sup>1</sup>?

Will God leave this man in the «land of the dead», this Spirit-filled man who has filled so many sick and handicapped people with health and life? Will he lie forever in the dust like a «shadow» in the land of «darkness», this man who has raised so many hopes in his followers? Can he no longer live in communion with God, this man who so completely trusted his Father's goodness? When and how will he ever fulfill his desire to «drink new wine» with them in the final banquet of God's reign? Was it all a naïve illusion on Jesus' part?

Certainly they are mourning the death of a man whose goodness and great-heartedness they came to know so well, but sooner or later death comes to everyone. What scandalizes them more is his brutal, unjust execution. Where is God? Won't he react to what they did to Jesus? Isn't he the defender of innocent victims? Was Jesus wrong in proclaiming his justice on behalf of the crucified ones?

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*God has raised him!*



We can never fully measure the impact of Jesus' execution on his followers. We know only that his disciples fled to Galilee. Why? Did their loyalty to Jesus collapse? Did their faith die with Jesus on the cross? Or did they return to Galilee simply to save their own lives? We don't know for sure. Only that the rapid execution of Jesus has plunged them, if not into total despair, at least into a radical crisis. Probably rather than losing their faith, they have become desolate followers escaping danger, disconcerted by what has happened<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> In the most ancient biblical understanding, people who die down to a place under the earth called *sheol*, filled with total silence, darkness, and dust. It is the «place of darkness». There are no signs of life there. The dead are like «shadows» (*rephaim*) who sleep in the dust, unable to praise God. No one comes back from *sheol*. They are left there, forgotten even by God (Ps 115:7; 88:6-13; Job 17:13-14; 38:17).

<sup>2</sup> Most scholars accept the flight of the disciples as an historical fact. Some consider it a sign of their «loss of faith» in Jesus (Vögel, Kessler). Others think it can be more fairly and accurately described as a «radical crisis» (Pesch, Schillebeeckx, Müller, Torres Queiruga).

But then something happens which is hard to explain. Those men come back to Jerusalem and gather in Jesus' name, proclaiming to everyone that the prophet who was sentenced to death a few days earlier by the temple authorities and the imperial representatives is alive. What makes them leave the safety of Galilee and return to Jerusalem, a truly dangerous place where they will soon be arrested and persecuted by the religious leaders? Who has pulled them out of their cowardice and confusion? Where have they suddenly gotten all this audacity and conviction? Why do they come back to gather in the name of the one they abandoned when they saw him being condemned to death? They give only one answer: «Jesus is alive. God has raised him». Their conviction is unanimous and unassailable. We know that, because it appears in all the traditions and writings that have been passed down to us. What do they tell us?

They all say the same thing, in different ways and different words: «Death has not overcome Jesus; the crucified one is alive. God has raised him». Jesus' followers know they are talking about something beyond human existence. No one knows from experience just what happens in death, let alone what can happen to someone who is resurrected by God after death. But they are soon able to express the essence of their faith in simple formulas. These short, very stable formulas began to circulate among the first generation of Christians between 35 and 40 A.D. The Christians used them to transmit their faith to new believers, to proclaim their joy in celebrations, and perhaps to reaffirm their loyalty to Christ in times of persecution. This is the heart of their confession: «God has raised Jesus from among the dead»<sup>3</sup>. He was not a passive observer of Jesus' execution. He has stepped in to rescue Jesus from the power of death. They express the idea of resurrection with two words: «awakening» and «raising»<sup>4</sup>. These two metaphors suggest something impressive and extravagant. God has gone down even to *sheol*, has entered the land of death where everything is darkness, silence and solitude. The dead are lying there, covered by dust, sleeping the sleep of death. God has «awakened» the crucified Jesus from among them, has stood him on his feet and «raised» him to life.

Then came other formulas, confessing that «Jesus died and has risen». This is no longer about God's intervention. Their attention has shifted to Jesus. It is he who awoke and rose from death, but it reality it was all God's doing. Jesus is awake because God wakened him; he is standing up because God raised him; he is full of life because God filled him with God's life. The loving act of God, his Father, is always there in the background<sup>5</sup>.

In all these formulas, the Christians speak of the «resurrection» of Jesus. But in the same period we also find liturgical songs and hymns acclaiming God for having exalted and glorified Jesus as Lord after his death. They do not speak of «resurrection». In these hymns, born of the early enthusiasm of the Christian communities, the believers are expressing themselves in another mental framework and a different language: God «has exalted» Jesus, he has «taken him up in glory», he has «seated him at the right hand of his throne» and has «established him as Lord»<sup>6</sup>.

This language is as old as the one that speaks of «resurrection». For the first Christians, the exaltation of Jesus to the glory of the Father is not something that happens after his resurrection, but a different way of affirming what God has done with the crucified one. To be «raised» is already to be exalted, that is, to be introduced into God's own life. To be «exalted» is to rise, to be pulled away from the power of death. The two languages enrich and complement each other, to suggest the action of God on the dead Jesus<sup>7</sup>.

We find the most important and meaningful confession of faith in a letter that Paul of Tarsus wrote around 55/56 A.D. to the Christian community of Corinth, a cosmopolitan city where different hellenist and oriental religions live together in a strange mix with temples erected to Isis, Serapis, Zeus, Aphrodite, Aesclepios, or Cybele. Paul encourages them to remain faithful to the gospel that he taught them on his visit around 51 A.D., the «good news... through which also you are being saved». This «news» is not Paul's invention. It is a teaching he has received, and is now transmitting faithfully along with other preachers of great stature who live and proclaim the same faith:

<sup>5</sup> A typical example of these confessions of faith is found in the earliest letter we have from Paul: «For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died» (1 Thess 4:14).

<sup>6</sup> Typical examples are the pre-Pauline hymn found in Phil 2:6-11, and the one in 1 Tim 3:16. We can also detect this language in hymnic fragments like Eph 4:7-10 or Rom 10:5-8.

<sup>7</sup> According to Luke the first preachers used these two languages interchangeably: «The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior» (Acis 5:30-31).

<sup>3</sup> Researchers say this was the earliest way of expressing faith in Jesus' resurrection. There is a typical example in Paul's letter to the Romans: «if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved» (10:9).

<sup>4</sup> The first Christians used two Greek terms: *egeirein*, «walking up» the dead person from his sleep, and *anistana*, «raising» or «standing up» the dead person lying in the dust of *sheol*.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve...<sup>8</sup>

One thing in this confession may surprise us. Why does it say that Jesus «was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures»? Did anyone witness that crucial moment? Why do the gospel writers speak of appearances on the «first day of the week», before the «third day»? In reality, in biblical language the «third day» means the «decisive day». After days of suffering and tribulation, the «third day» brings salvation. God always saves and liberates on the «third day». God has the last word; the «third day» belongs to him. Thus we read in the prophet Hosea: «Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he who will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him»<sup>9</sup>. Different rabbinical commentaries interpret this «third day» announced by Hosea as «the day of the resurrection of the dead», «the day of consolation on which God will revive the dead and will raise us up»<sup>10</sup>. The first Christians believe that this definitive «third day» has come for Jesus. He has entered into full salvation. We are still going through days of trial and suffering, but the «third day» has dawned with Jesus' resurrection<sup>11</sup>.

This language might have been understood in the Jewish culture, but the missionaries who traveled through the cities of the Empire felt that people in the Greek culture were resistant to the idea of «resurrection». Paul could see that,

when he started talking about the risen Jesus at the Areopagus in Athens. «When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed, but others said, "We will hear you again about this"»<sup>12</sup>. So some sectors found a different language

<sup>8</sup> 1Cor 15:3-5. Linguistic analysis suggests that this confession of faith is of Jewish origin and has been adapted to the Greek world.

<sup>9</sup> The tradition probably came from the Church in Jerusalem and was embraced by the leaders of the Church in Antioch around 35 or 40 A.D. Paul surely came to know it during his stay in that great city around 40 or 42 A.D.

<sup>10</sup> These are midrashic writings, like the *Midrash Rabbah* or the targums that translate and comment on the Hosea text.

<sup>11</sup> This is the most commonly accepted interpretation today (Vögtle, Leon-Dufour, Schillebeeckx). Some scholars recall, however, that in the Jewish way of thinking a dead person is really dead «after three days». The expression in the Christian confession would then mean that God raised Jesus, not from apparent death after one or two days, but from real death after three days (Kegel, Goguel, Schmitt).

which, without distorting faith in the risen one, was more appropriate and easily accepted by people of a Greek mentality. Luke in particular may have helped to introduce a new language presenting the risen one as «he who lives», «the living one». Thus in his gospel the women at the tomb are asked, «Why do you look for the living among the dead?»<sup>13</sup>. Years later the book of Revelation has the risen one making strong statements, very different from the first formulas of faith: «I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever, and I have the keys of Death and of Hades»<sup>14</sup>.

## What happened in Jesus' resurrection?



What do these first generation Christians mean by «the risen Christ»? What do they mean by «the resurrection of Jesus»? How do they think of it?

Resurrection is something that has happened to Jesus. Something that took place in the crucified one, not in the imagination of his followers. Everyone is convinced of this. It is not just a way of saying that their faith in Jesus has been reawakened. Certainly a new faith in Jesus has been awakened in the disciples' hearts, but his resurrection came before that; it preceded everything that they have experienced since then. It is in fact the event that pulled them out of their confusion and frustration, transforming their relationship with Jesus at its roots.

This resurrection is not a return to his earlier life on earth. Jesus does not return to biological life as we know it, to die irreversibly some other day. The sources never suggest that. This resurrection is not the reanimation of a cadaver. It is much more than that. The first Christians never confuse Jesus' resurrection with what might have happened in the gospel stories about Lazarus, Jairus' daughter, or the young boy at Nain. Jesus does not return to this life; he enters definitively into «the Life of God»<sup>15</sup>. A liberated life, where death has no power over him. Paul makes this very clear: «We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death

<sup>13</sup> Luke 24:5. See also Luke 24:23; Acts 1:3; 25:19.

<sup>14</sup> Rev 1:17-18 and 2:8. This book, the last of the writings in the New Testament, was composed around 95 A.D. at the end of the reign of Domitian, in Asia Minor.

<sup>15</sup> John's gospel does not confuse the raising of Lazarus, who came out of the tomb with «his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth», with the resurrection of Jesus, who left the «linen wrappings» and the cloth behind in the tomb. Lazarus returns to this life full of enslavements and darkness. In contrast, Jesus enters into the land of freedom and delight.



no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once and for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God<sup>16</sup>. However, the gospel narratives about the «appearances» of the risen Jesus may leave us somewhat confused<sup>17</sup>. According to the gospel writers Jesus can be seen and touched, he can eat, he can go up into heaven until he is hidden by a cloud. If we understand these narrative details in a material way, it seems as if Jesus has come back to this earth to go on living with his disciples as they were before. But the gospel writers themselves tell us that's not what happened. It is the same Jesus, but not the Jesus they knew before; he comes to them full of life, but they do not recognize him right away; he is in their midst, but they cannot hold on to him; he is someone real and concrete, but they cannot live with him as they did in Galilee. It is certainly Jesus, but in a new existence.

Jesus' followers also do not understand his resurrection as a kind of mysterious survival of his immortal soul, which is how the Greek culture would think of it<sup>18</sup>. The risen one is not someone who survives death, stripped of his corporeality. They are Hebrews, and in their way of thinking, the «body» is not simply the physical or material side of a person, something that can be separated from a different, spiritual side. The «body» is the whole person, who experiences his or her own rootedness in the world and in life with others. When they speak of the «body» they are thinking of a person in his or her whole world of relationships and shared experiences, a whole history of conflicts and hurts, joys and suffering. They cannot imagine Jesus risen without a body; he would be something else, but not a human being<sup>19</sup>. But naturally they are not thinking of a physical, flesh and blood body, subject to the power of death; rather it is a «glorious body» that expresses and gives fullness to the real life he lived in this world. When God raises Jesus he raises up his earthly life, marked by his commitment to God's reign, his acts of kindness to the little ones, his youth so violently cut short, his struggles and conflicts, his obedience unto death. Jesus is raised with a «body» that expresses and gives fullness to his whole earthly life<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Rom 6:9-10.

<sup>17</sup> Later we shall discuss these narratives, composed between 70 and 90 A.D. They are not biographical narratives. They do not try to give us information on which to reconstruct the events as they happened, beginning on the third day after the crucifixion. They are wonderful «catechetical resources» which evoke the first experiences, in order to explore more deeply our faith in the risen Christ and draw out its meaning for believers.

<sup>18</sup> In speaking of the risen one they used the language of resurrection, of «exaltation» to the glory of God, or of «life», but they were never thinking of the «immortality of the soul» of Jesus.

<sup>19</sup> This reflects studies on the «corporeality of the risen one» by authors like Kessler, Boismard, Deneken, Bouttier, Sesboüé, Martelot and others.

For the first Christians, more than any other representation or mental frame of reference, Jesus' resurrection is an act of God, whose creative power rescues him from death and brings him fully into God's own life. This is what the early Christian confessions and the first preachers say again and again. In one way of saying it, God embraces Jesus at the very center of death, filling him with all God's creative power. Jesus dies crying out, «My God, why have you abandoned me?»; in dying he meets his Father, who embraces him with immense love and prevents his life from being extinguished. At the very moment when Jesus feels that his whole being is being lost forever, as is the sad fate of all human beings, God intervenes to give him God's own life. Where everything is ending for Jesus, God is beginning something radically new. When everything seems irremediably lost in the absurdity of death, God is beginning a new creation.

This creative action by God, accepting Jesus into his unfathomable mystery, is an event that overflows all the structures of life as we know it. It transcends any experience we might have in this world. We have no way of describing it. That is why no gospel writer has tried to describe Jesus' resurrection. No one can be a witness to that transcendent act of God<sup>21</sup>. The resurrection no longer belongs to the visible, tangible world. Thus we say that it is not properly speaking an «historical event», like others which happen in the world and which we can observe and verify, but it is a «real event» that really happened. And that is not all. For believers in Jesus it is the most real, important and decisive event that has ever occurred in human history, because it is the foundation and the true hope of history<sup>22</sup>.

How do the first generation Christians speak of this creative act of God, which we cannot observe? Paul's language is helpful. In his words, Jesus has been raised by the «power» of God, who gives Jesus his new, risen life; because he is filled with this divine power he can be called «Lord», the same name that the Greek-speaking Jews used for Yahweh. Paul also says that he was raised by the «glory» of God, that is, by that creative, saving force that reveals God's greatness. That is

<sup>21</sup> Only the [apocryphal] *Gospel of Peter*, probably composed around 150 A.D. in Syria, dares to report that the Roman soldiers saw «three men come forth from the tomb, and two of them supporting one, and a cross following them: and the heads of the two reached up to heaven, but the head of the one they led was higher than the heavens».

<sup>22</sup> In everyday conversation we tend to think of «historical events» as «real events», things that have happened. In the technical language used by theology, the only «historical events» are those that can be empirically verified. Thus some theologians affirm the resurrection of Jesus as a «real» event, but consider it inappropriate to call it an «historical event» without further explanation, since its full reality cannot be empirically analyzed.

why the risen Jesus possesses a «glorious body», by which Paul does not mean radiant or resplendent, but rather overflowing with God's own glorious power. Finally, Paul says that he has been raised by the «spirit» of God, by his creative force. That is why his risen body is a «spiritual body», that is, fully enlivened by the vital and creative force of God<sup>23</sup>.

The first Christians believe that this intervention by God is the beginning of the final resurrection, the fullness of salvation. Jesus is only the «firstborn from the dead»<sup>24</sup>, the first one born into the definitive life of God. He has gone before us into the enjoyment of a fullness that will also be there for us. His resurrection is not something private, only for him; it is the foundation and guarantee of resurrection for all humanity and all creation. Jesus is the «first fruits» of a universal harvest to come<sup>25</sup>. «And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power»<sup>26</sup>. In raising Jesus, God begins the «new creation». He comes out of his hiddenness and reveals his ultimate plan, the purpose for which he first created the world: to share his infinite happiness with humanity.

## 3

*On the way to new faith in the risen Christ*

What happened, to make Jesus' disciples believe something so amazing about him? What caused such radical turnaround in these disciples, who had given him up as a lost cause just a few days earlier? What is happening to them now, since his death? Can we come closer to the early experience that sparked their enthusiasm for the risen Christ?

The stories that have come down to us do not provide a clear basis for understanding just what happened after Jesus' death. We cannot penetrate the meaning of their experience by using historical methods. It is clear, however, that the faith of his followers did not come out of nowhere. Something happened to them. All the sources tell us that what they went through not only revived their faith in Jesus, but opened them to a new and surprising experience of his presence in their midst.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus is raised by the «power» (*dynamis*) of God (2 Cor 3:4; Eph 1:19–20); by the «glory» (*doxa*) of God (Rom 6:4; Phil 3:21); and by the «spirit» (*pneuma*) of God (Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 15:35–49).

<sup>24</sup> Col 1:18.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Cor 15:20.

<sup>26</sup> 1 Cor 6:14.

It was a rich and complex process, caused by more than one factor. Jesus' followers have been reflecting on what happened, pondering their faith in God's faithfulness and his power over death, and thinking about the life they shared with Jesus so intensely. This process is made up of questions, reflections, unexpected events, and amazing experiences of faith. Together these things have awakened in them a new faith in Jesus; their growing sense of his presence with them after his death does not only come from reflection on the past. They think it comes from God. Something so great and unexpected could only be a revelation of God. Without God's action they would be lost in their questions and doubts, unable to reach any joyful certainty about what happened to Jesus<sup>27</sup>. What can we learn about this process?

Jesus' disciples, like almost all the Jews of his time, expected the «resurrection of the righteous» at the end of time. Without that expectation they could hardly have imagined such a thing as resurrection. It was not an ancient Jewish belief but a relatively new faith, still being formulated in different ways. The problem arose most sharply in 168–164 B.C., when an uncounted number of Jews were martyred by Antiochus Epiphanes for remaining faithful to the Law: would God abandon to death those who had loved him enough to die for him? Wouldn't he give back life to those who have sacrificed their lives out of faithfulness to him? Jesus' followers were probably asking themselves the same thing in view of his death. The response of the prophet Daniel was to proclaim a new faith: at the end of time, those who have remained faithful to God will be saved. «Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever»<sup>28</sup>. The martyrs who are faithful to God, and the wise who lead many on the right path, will awake from the sleep of death. Now they are dust, but God will make them shine like the stars.

<sup>27</sup> Recent scholarship has moved away from the traditional tendency to explain the birth of faith in the risen Christ as a result of concrete experiences and now focuses more on an overall process (Müller; Kessler; Torres Queiruga), including such factors as Jewish expectations about life after death (Berger), faith in the final resurrection of the dead (Pannenberg, Wilkens), the interpretive models that were available to the disciples (Marxsen, Boistard), the cognitive process (Schillebeeckx), or their memories of the message and activity of Jesus (Pesch). Duan and others also point out that we don't know how long the process lasted; Luke was applying a conventional formula in fitting the appearances of the risen Christ into a 40-day period.

Certainly Jesus' disciples shared this faith. It was widely accepted in their time; especially by apocalyptic writers<sup>29</sup>, although it was the Pharisees who most actively promoted it among the people; only the Sadducees rejected it as a «knowledge» not supported by the earliest traditions. Like most pious Jews, the disciples probably also recited this blessing every day at sunrise and sunset: «Blessed are you, Lord, who make the dead live»<sup>30</sup>. This hope surely helped them understand what they were going through. If they were experiencing Jesus as alive, didn't it mean the final resurrection of the righteous was here? Wasn't Jesus living God's full salvation?

But the early resurrection of one person, before the end of time, was something new. The disciples were expecting the «resurrection of the righteous» in general, and in the plural. They had surely heard about the martyrdom of seven brothers, tortured along with their mother by Antiochus Epiphanes. It was a very popular story, with an impressive scene in which the brothers challenge the king, confessing their faith in their own resurrection<sup>31</sup>. We don't know for sure, but the idea of specific martyrs being raised by God may have helped the disciples overcome the scandal of the cross. Jesus, unjustly assassinated for his faithfulness to God, cannot be annihilated by death; God's vindication for the martyr has been completely fulfilled in him.

But this vision is not quite enough. The resurrection of these specific martyrs only affects each one individually; it has nothing to do with salvation for the rest of humanity<sup>32</sup>. This is different: Jesus' followers eventually start talking about his resurrection as a source of salvation for all humanity, the «first fruit» of a universal resurrection, the beginning of the last times. The disciples have been deeply «marked» by Jesus. The crucifixion cannot erase all that they have experienced with him. In Jesus they have experienced God erupting in the world, in Books like 1 Enoch 92-105 and the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* clearly affirm it: «Those who die in pain will rise up in joy... and those who die in the name of the Lord will awaken to life».<sup>33</sup> This is in the second blessing of the *Shemone estor*: «You are powerful and bring low the proud, you are strong and judge oppressors, you live forever and raise the dead, you command the wind and make the dew fall, you give food to the living and give life to the dead. In one moment you make our salvation spring up. Blessed are you, Lord, who make the dead live» (from a brief Palestinian text of the Cairo genizah).

<sup>29</sup> The brothers say among other things: «You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws». Meanwhile their mother encourages them: «The Creator of the world... will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws» (2 Macc 7:9-23).

<sup>30</sup> The same can be said of Enoch or the prophet Elijah who were mysteriously taken up into heaven, in events unconnected to the final salvation in the last times (Sirach 44:16; 48:9, 12).

anew and definitive way. His healing power has destroyed Satan's power and rescued the sick and demon-possessed from evil, showing them a new world of abundant life. His acceptance of the last as the first in God's reign has awakened the hope of the poor in a God who is beginning to show his liberating power in the face of so much injustice and abuse. His meals with sinners and undesirables have shown them the final banquet and the joy that will come in the last times. With Jesus they have felt the eruption of God's saving power and love. Could it be that in his resurrection, they were experiencing God's liberating eruption to establish the definitive reign of life here and now?

## 4

*The decisive experience*

God is in the very heart of this process: inspiring their search, throwing light on their questions, clearing away their doubts, and opening up their incipient faith to new horizons. The disciples are convinced of this: God is making the risen Jesus present in their hearts. At some point they realize that it is God who is revealing the crucified one to them, full of life. That wasn't clear to them at first, but now they are really «seeing» him in all his risen «glory». Without that experience, perhaps they would have revered his memory for a while; then it would have begun to fade<sup>34</sup>.

How do the disciples understand what is happening to them? A very early formula, repeated always in the same way, is their first way of expressing it: Jesus «let himself be seen»<sup>35</sup>. They had lost him in the mystery of death, but now he shows himself to them, full of life. The term comes from the Greek Bible, which uses it to speak of God's «appearances» to Abraham, Jacob, and others. In reality God does not appear in these scenes in a visible way, but comes out of his unfathomable mystery to establish real communication with human beings: Abraham and Jacob experience his presence. Thus their words alone do not tell us how the disciples perceive the presence of the risen Jesus. What the words suggest is not so much that the risen one has appeared as a visible figure, but rather that

<sup>33</sup> Something similar may have happened with John the Baptist; rumors began circulating about him as a prophet «returned to life» (Mark 6:16; 8:28).

<sup>34</sup> 1 Cor 15:5-8. The Greek word *otheis* is usually translated «he appeared». According to all the scholars, a better translation would be «he made himself visible» or «he let himself be seen».

he is acting within the disciples, creating conditions in which they can perceive his presence<sup>35</sup>.

It is even more enriching to read what Paul says from his own experience since he is the only witness who speaks directly of what happened to him<sup>36</sup>. He never describes or explains it in psychological terms. What has happened is «grace». It is a gift, which he attributes to God's initiative or to the intervention of the risen one. He can only say that he has been «reached» by Christ. Jesus, the risen one has taken control of him, has made him his own. In that experience he has «discovered the power of his resurrection». Paul is aware that the mystery of Jesus is being revealed to him. What he is experiencing is «the revelation of Jesus Christ». All the veils are being removed; Jesus becomes diaphanous and luminous to him. It is not an illusion. It is an amazing reality: «God has revealed his Son in me». The impact is so powerful that it causes a total reorientation of his life. His encounter with the risen one makes him «understand» the mystery of God and the reality of life in a radically new way. Paul is not the same person he was. He who persecuted the followers of the crucified Jesus is now proclaiming to everyone the Good News that he was trying to destroy before. A total revolution of values is being produced in his life. Paul feels himself as a «new person». His own transformation is the best testimony to what he has experienced. From his own experience he can proclaim to all: «it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me»<sup>37</sup>.

Somewhat later, when Christians have already been living their faith in the risen Christ for forty or fifty years, we find stories filled with the delight that came from the disciples' first «encounters» with the risen Christ. These stories build on earlier traditions, reworked by each writer according to his own theological vision as a conclusion to his gospel about Jesus<sup>38</sup>. We see right away that they are not trying to give us detailed information about what happened forty or fifty years earlier. Indeed it is impossible to reconstruct the events on the basis of what

they tell us<sup>39</sup>. Rather they are «catechetical resources» composed to help people explore different aspects of the resurrection of Christ, with important consequences for his followers. They did not spring up out of nothing, with no basis in reality, but represent a collection of experiences that the Christians could still remember: experiences of Jesus' unexpected presence after his death, their doubts and uncertainties in the first moments, their processes of conversion, reflections on the Scriptures that helped them understand what was happening. However the gospel writers are not trying to add more information to what they have already said about Jesus. Their purpose is to make everyone understand that his life and his death must be understood in a new dimension. The Jesus that their readers have been able to follow through their narrative, proclaiming and dying for the reign of God, is not dead. He has been raised by God and is still full of life, accompanying his followers.

What do these stories tell us about the experience that transformed Jesus' followers?<sup>40</sup> The core of the stories is a personal encounter with Jesus, full of life. That is the key: Jesus lives and is with them again; everything else comes later. The disciples have met the one who called them to serve the reign of God, the one they abandoned at the critical moment of his crucifixion. While they were still behind closed doors, filled with fear of the Jewish authorities, «Jesus came and stood among them»<sup>41</sup>; nothing and no one can stop the risen Jesus from returning to be with his followers. The women have met the one who defended their dignity and accepted them in his company: «Jesus met them and said,

<sup>35</sup> It is practically impossible to harmonize the «information» they offer, because they do not agree on who witnessed the appearances, in what order, where, when, and under what circumstances. We can say nothing for certain about those questions. Nevertheless, those who have tried to trace the historical steps agree along some general lines, which can be summarized as follows: 1) It was an experience shared by different followers, and repeated in different circumstances. 2) The first experiences of the men probably took place in Galilee. 3) It is not clear whether the first appearance was to Peter or Mary Magdalene; a growing number of scholars contend that Mary's came first, but was later suppressed in the tradition (Hengel, Benoit, Schüssler Fiorenza, Theissen/Merz, Lorenzen, and others). 4) Some experiences may have occurred in the context of meals or dinners, where the memory of Jesus was more intense (Leon-Dufour). 5) The psycho-historical hypothesis of Lüdemann, which explains these experiences as a way of overcoming repressed guilt, especially by Peter (who denied Jesus) and Paul (who persecuted him.), is highly debatable and not well supported by the texts. The same is true of J.D. Crossan's suggestion that these stories grew out of «feminine eulogies» or ritual mourning by a group of women: this position is based on a combination of hypotheses that cannot be easily justified.

<sup>36</sup> The right way to read these texts is to see in their graphic images, not specific descriptions of what happened, but narrative processes that try somehow to evoke the experience of the risen Christ.

<sup>41</sup> John 20:19.

“Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him<sup>42</sup>; once more they can feel his intimate presence. Mary Magdalene has met the Teacher who cured her and whom she loves forever; once more, with tears in her eyes, she hears Jesus call her by name in his own voice; no one else has ever spoken to her that way<sup>43</sup>. No. That’s probably not exactly how it happened, but it is the most expressive way possible to communicate what happens to those men and women when they experience Jesus again in their lives<sup>44</sup>.

This encounter with the risen Jesus is a gift. The stories say repeatedly that the disciples don’t take the initiative; Jesus does. It is he who comes to them full of life, pulling them out of their confusion and incredulity. The disciples are taken by surprise when Jesus lets himself be seen in the midst of that group of fearful men. Mary Magdalene is looking for a cadaver when Jesus calls to her. No one is expecting the risen Jesus. It is he who becomes present in their lives, beyond all their expectation. That is a «grace» of God, as Paul puts it.

The stories show it as a peacemaking experience, reconciling them to Jesus. The disciples know they have abandoned him. The sorrow in their hearts is not only sadness over Jesus’ death; it is the sadness that comes from guilt. But the stories never show a sign of reproach or condemnation. Their encounter with Jesus is an experience of forgiveness. A meaningful greeting is repeatedly attributed to him: «Peace be with you»<sup>45</sup>. The risen one gives them the gift of God’s peace and blessing; the disciples feel forgiven and accepted again into communion with him<sup>46</sup>. He is still the same Jesus. He is giving them the same peace that he gave to the sick and to sinners when he walked with them in Galilee. That is also the great gift that God offers to all his sons and daughters through the dead and risen Christ: forgiveness, peace, and resurrection.

According to the stories, their encounter with the risen Christ transforms his disciples at their very roots. Once more Jesus offers them his trust: their disloyalty has been cured by forgiveness, and they can begin a new life. All things are possible with Jesus. Their joy is so great that they cannot believe it. Jesus fills

them with his spirit and liberates them from sadness, cowardice, and the fears that paralyze them<sup>47</sup>. The Emmaus story is an unequalled description of the way the disciples are transformed by accepting the risen Jesus into their life. They were walking sadly, but when they heard his words «their hearts were burning within them». They were crushed by Jesus’ death, but when they experienced him full of life, they discovered that their hopes were not exaggerated but too small and limited. They had left the group of disciples, frustrated by all that had happened, but now they return to Jerusalem to tell the others «what had happened on the road»<sup>48</sup>. A new life is beginning for them.

This encounter with the risen one has to be communicated and shared with others. To meet him is to feel called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. Above all the stories emphasize the experience of the Eleven. They are the beginning of the proclamation of Jesus Christ to all nations. There are as many as three versions of this «official» encounter. They were composed later on, in response to the needs of different communities<sup>49</sup>. In John, he tells them: «Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you»<sup>50</sup>. The Eleven must feel «sent» by Jesus. He doesn’t say to what or to whom he is sending them; they are to do what they have seen him doing. Their mission is the same as the one he received from the Father; their job is simply to extend his work into the future. In Luke, the Eleven are called to testify to this experience of the risen one: «You are witnesses of these things»<sup>51</sup>. These witnesses will be the core of a new movement to proclaim, in the name of the risen Jesus, «repentance and forgiveness of sins» to all nations<sup>52</sup>. Matthew in turn presents Jesus as the universal Lord of heaven and earth, who sends the Eleven «to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them»<sup>53</sup>. It is not just about proclaiming a doctrine, but raising up disciples who will learn to live with Jesus as their focal point, and who commit themselves to follow him faithfully through the act of baptism<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> John 20:19-22.

<sup>48</sup> This extraordinary story is in Luke 24:13-35. It deserves to be read and enjoyed slowly.

<sup>49</sup> Of course the words attributed to the risen Jesus by each gospel writer are not the words he spoke in a particular appearance. Each editor uses his own language to emphasize different aspects of the mission that began to unfold after the paschal experience. John focuses on the «sendings»; Luke characteristically focuses on their «witness»; Matthew on «teaching» and «baptizing».

<sup>50</sup> John 20:21.

<sup>51</sup> Luke 24:48.

<sup>52</sup> Luke 24:47.

<sup>53</sup> Matt 28:19-20. This very specific language reflects a missionary practice and liturgical customs that were established later by the Christian community.

<sup>54</sup> At the end of Mark, Jesus tells them: «Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation» (16:15).

This evangelizing mission is not given only to the Eleven. All those who meet the risen Christ feel his call to share their own experience with others. He tells Mary Magdalene: «Go to my brothers and say to them...»; with amazing docility she stops holding on to him, goes to where the disciples are, and tells them: «I have seen the Lord»<sup>55</sup>. The disciples at Emmaus do the same, when their eyes are opened and they recognize the risen one: they return to Jerusalem with burning hearts and tell the others «what had happened to them on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread»<sup>56</sup>. The second and third generation of Christians recall that it was the encounter with the living Jesus after his death that had sparked the contagious proclamation of the Good News of Jesus<sup>57</sup>.

## 5 Was Jesus' tomb empty?

All the gospel writers say that early in the morning after the crucifixion, some women went to the sepulchre where Jesus' body had been taken, and found it open and empty<sup>58</sup>. Naturally they recoiled in amazement. According to the story, an «angel» of God reassured them with the words: «Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is no longer there, is the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter

<sup>55</sup> John 20:17-18.

<sup>56</sup> Luke 24:35.

<sup>57</sup> Luke is the only gospel writer who tells of Jesus' «ascension» into heaven. In Matthew Jesus does not leave his disciples or say goodbye. The risen one is always with them: «I am with you always, to the end of the age» (28:20). John also does not speak of the «ascension». The risen one is with his disciples, filling them with inspiration: «Receive the Holy Spirit» (20:22). The «ascension» is a literary device imagined by Luke with a clear theological purpose. He offers two different versions. At the end of his gospel he presents it as a solemn culmination of Jesus' time on earth (Luke 24:50-53); the risen one is carried up into heaven (to the unfathomable world of God) while he is blessing the disciples. The disciples worship him for the last time, return to Jerusalem overflowing with joy, and stay there blessing God in the temple. Later the same Luke describes the «ascension» as the point of departure for the time of the Church and its evangelizing mission (Acts 16:11); Jesus «was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight», and they are told that he «will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven». Here too they return to Jerusalem, not to the temple but to the «room upstairs», where they receive the Spirit that impels them into the evangelizing mission (Conzehmann, Lohfink, Leon-Dufour and others).

<sup>58</sup> Mark 16:1-8; Matt 28:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18. All the narratives probably draw on Mark, although John's version, which speaks of the appearance to Mary Magdalene, may be somewhat independent.

that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him»<sup>59</sup>. This story developed later. The earliest confessions and liturgical hymns that speak of Jesus' resurrection, or of his exaltation to the life of God, do not mention the empty tomb. Paul of Tarsus also does not speak of it in his letters. The empty tomb is not mentioned until the decade of the sixties. By all the evidence, it did not play a significant role in the birth of faith in the risen Jesus. It only gained importance when the report of it was integrated into other traditions that spoke of «appearances» by the risen Jesus.

It is hard to know whether things happened just as the gospels describe them. To begin with, it is hard to know for sure how and where Jesus was buried. The Romans usually left crucified bodies on the cross, available to the wild dogs and vultures, and later threw their remains into a common grave or dumping place without ritual or funerary honors. This final humiliation for the convict was part of the rite of crucifixion. Did Jesus end up there, in a common grave with many other convicts, expelled from life with no honor at all? Historically that seems unlikely. According to one tradition Jesus was buried by Jewish authorities who asked Pilate to have him killed», and later «took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb»<sup>60</sup>. This information is plausible. The authorities in Jerusalem are concerned: the Passover festivities are beginning; those bodies, hanging on the cross, stain the earth and contaminate the whole city. Jesus and his two companions have to be buried in haste, without any ceremony, before the beginning of that solemn Passover sabbath.

But the gospels tell a different story. They recognize honestly that it was not the disciples who buried Jesus: they had all fled to Galilee. And the women could not have done it; they followed the burial «at a distance». But a good man named Joseph of Arimathea, unknown to the sources before this point, asks Pilate for authorization and buries him «in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock». The identity and action of Joseph of Arimathea are not at all clear<sup>61</sup>, but it might

<sup>59</sup> Mark 16:6-7. The bearer of this message from God is described differently in the different versions: «a young man, dressed in a white robe» (Mark); «an angel of the Lord» (Matthew); «two men in dazzling clothes» (Luke); «two angels in white» (John).

<sup>60</sup> Acts 13:28-29. John's gospel says: «The Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed» (John 19:31).

<sup>61</sup> The story appears in Mark 15:42-47; Matt 27:57-61; Luke 23:56-58; and John 19:38-42. According to Mark, Joseph of Arimathea was a respected member of the Sanhedrin; he does not appear as a follower of Jesus, but he also was «waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God». Luke describes him as «a good and righteous man» who did not agree with the other Sanhedrin members in condemning Jesus. Matthew goes an important step further, and tells us that he «was

well have happened that way. We know that occasionally the authorities did authorize a more dignified and respectable burial by friends or relatives for a crucified body<sup>62</sup>. It is hard to know what happened. Certainly Jesus was not buried with funeral honors. His followers were not there; the men were in hiding, and the women could only look on from a distance. It all happened very quickly, because it had to be done by nightfall. We don't know for sure who had possession of the body, the Roman soldiers or servants of the temple authorities. We don't know if he ended up in a common grave like so many others, or if Joseph of Arimathea was able to bury him in a tomb nearby<sup>63</sup>.

For many researchers it is also unclear whether the women found Jesus' tomb empty. They ask, does this narrative reflect the memory of what happened, or is it a literary composition that tries to describe graphically what everyone believes: that if Jesus has risen, they should not look for him in the world of the dead? Certainly the event is plausible, and there are ample reasons to affirm it. If the story had been invented as realistic support for the resurrection of Jesus, it is hard to imagine choosing a group of women, whose testimony carried so little weight in Jewish society, as the protagonists; wouldn't that lead people to believe that something as fundamental as the resurrection was «a woman thing»? Besides, how could Christians proclaim the resurrection in the city of Jerusalem, where people could see if Jesus' body was still there in the tomb?<sup>64</sup>.

So it is hard to establish an historically irrefutable conclusion. What we can say is that the story simply lays out in narrative terms what the first and second generations of Christians were already confessing: «Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised by God». The specific words attributed to the angel are a simple, almost literal repetition of the preaching of the first disciples<sup>65</sup>. This is another way of proclaiming God's victory over death, a graphic way of saying that God has opened the gates of *sheol* so that the crucified Jesus could escape from the power of death. More than historical information, what we find in these stories is the preaching of the first Christians on the resurrection of Jesus.

Everything leads to the conclusion that their faith in the risen Christ was inspired, not by the empty tomb but by the «encounter» with him, full of life after his death, that his followers experienced.

Then why was the story written? Some believe it was intended to explain the origins of a Christian celebration that took place beside Jesus' tomb at least once a year, going up in pilgrimage to that sacred place at sunrise on the day of Passover. The culmination of that celebration was a reading of this narrative. It proclaimed the Good News to the pilgrims at the tomb: «You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him». This is a suggestive hypothesis that can-

also a disciple of Jesus<sup>(1)</sup>, despite being «a rich man». John describes him as «a disciple of Jesus though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews». We can also see a gradual development in the tradition about Jesus' burial. In Mark, Joseph of Arimathea did the best he could: «he wrapped the body in a linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock». Luke specifies a tomb «where no one had ever been laid»; Matthew adds that it was «a new tomb» that Joseph himself «had hewn in the rock». In John the hasty burial has become dignified and even solemn: Nicodemus comes to help Joseph with «a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds»<sup>(1)</sup>. Together they «took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloth, according to the burial custom of the Jews», then they «laid it in a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid», which by some miracle is there «in a garden».

<sup>62</sup> Philo mentions crucified bodies that were brought down and handed over to their relatives so that they might receive burial honors» (*In Flaccum*, 83). Flavius Josephus persuaded Titus to hand over to him three crucified men, relatives of his, before they were dead; one of them even survived (*Antiquity*, 420-421). In addition, in 1968 at Giv'at ha-Mivtar north of Jerusalem, archaeologists discovered the body of a man crucified in Jesus' time, named Yehoanan; the body was in a family ossuary, indicating that he was buried by family members.

<sup>63</sup> Each of the possibilities is defended by some modern scholars. The one thing they agree on is that Jesus did not receive the care that usually goes with a burial (Benoit, Leon-Dufour, Vögler, Parrot, Pannenberg and others).

<sup>64</sup> This argument was widely accepted after the study of H. von Campenhausen, but it does not carry too much weight because we do not know when the Christians began proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem, or whether the tomb was accessible then. It is also interesting to

note that people had been talking about the resurrection of the Baptist without feeling a need to show that his tomb was empty (Mark 6:14-16).

<sup>65</sup> Finding Jesus' tomb empty would not be an irrefutable proof of his resurrection, because it could be explained in different ways. The body might have been stolen (as the soldiers were bribed to say in Matt 28:13); it could have been taken to another place (as Mary Magdalene first thought, according to John 20:15); the women might have gone to the wrong tomb; or the body could have been «revived» without entering into God's life (Lazarus' tomb was also left empty).

<sup>66</sup> See the Acts 3:15; 4:10; 5:30 and others, especially 2:23-24: «You crucified [Jesus] ... But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power».

not be dismissed, but it is very hard to prove<sup>67</sup>. A simpler explanation is that the story developed in popular circles, where the bodily resurrection of Jesus was understood in a material and physical way, as the continuation of his earthly body. The story held great fascination for these believers. What better place to grasp the victory of God over death than in an empty tomb?

In any case there is general agreement that the exegetical details do not resolve the issues raised by the narratives. The narratives certainly take as given the disappearance of the cadaver; without it the resurrection would be unimaginable in the biblical mentality<sup>68</sup>. The story of the empty tomb, as it is given at the end of each gospel, carries a message of great importance. It would be a mistake to look for the crucified Jesus in a tomb; he is not there; he does not belong to the world of the dead. It would be a mistake to worship and acknowledge him for what he did in the past. He has risen. He is more full of life than ever. He is still enlivening and guiding his followers. We must «go back to Galilee» and follow his steps: curing those who suffer, accepting those who are excluded, forgiving sinners, defending women and blessing children. We must offer meals open to everyone, and go into people's houses proclaiming peace; we must tell parables about the goodness of God, and denounce all religion that works against people's happiness; we must go on proclaiming the nearness of God's reign. A different, more friendly, abundant and just life is possible with Jesus. There is hope for everyone: «Go back to Galilee. He is going ahead of you; there you will see him»<sup>69</sup>.



Jesus' execution raised doubts about his whole message and activity. The tragic end of his story raised serious questions for even his most faithful followers: who was right, Jesus or his executioners? Whose side was God on? It was not only Jesus who died on the cross. They had also killed his message, his plan for God's reign, and his aspirations for a new world. Only God could say whether or not he was right.

Even today, in the texts that have come down to us, we can see the joy of the first disciples on discovering that God has not abandoned Jesus. He has stepped forward to defend him. He has identified with him, forever dispelling any ambiguity. For Jesus' followers, the resurrection is not only a victory over death; it is God's own response, confirming his beloved Jesus and denying those who condemned him. This is the first thing the early preachers say, over and over, in the vicinity of the temple and the streets of Jerusalem: «You crucified and killed [Jesus] by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up ...»; «Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised up from the dead»; «The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree»<sup>70</sup>. By raising him, God has confirmed Jesus' life and message, his plan for God's reign, and everything he has done. What Jesus proclaimed in Galilee about the Father's tenderness and mercy is true: God is exactly as Jesus described him in the parables. Jesus' way of being and acting are true to the Father's will. His solidarity with those who suffer, his defense of the poor, his forgiveness for sinners, are exactly what God wanted. Jesus was right to seek a happier, more dignified life for all. That is the greatest desire God holds in his heart. It is the way of life that pleases the Father. It is the pathway to life.

God has not only vindicated Jesus, he has also done him justice. God was not passively, silently watching what they were doing to Jesus; he has returned in all its fullness the life that was so unjustly taken from him. In the resurrection Jesus' followers can see God's wonderful response to the abuses that were committed against him. Evil has a great deal of power, but only to the point of death; the

<sup>67</sup> This hypothesis is strongly defended by L. Schenke and Van Iersel. It is not widely accepted by other scholars.

<sup>68</sup> It is not surprising that in our time some theologians, who confess their faith in the «fact» of Jesus' resurrection, still disagree on «how» it happened. Of course that debate is beyond the purpose and limits of the present book.

<sup>69</sup> Scholars have interpreted the invitation to return to Galilee in different ways. A growing number understand Galilee in a symbolic sense: as the place of evangelically following Jesus (Beasley-Murray); as the point of departure for the Church's mission to all nations (Evans); as a symbol of the Christian life lived from day to day (Leoni-Dufour); as the place of the *parousia* (Lohmeyer, Lichfoot, Marxsen in part).

<sup>70</sup> This formula of «contrast», between their action and God's reaction, is a central element in the early preaching (Acts 2:23-24; 4:10; 5:30 and other passages).

Jewish authorities and powerful Romans have killed Jesus, but they could not annihilate him. Beyond death, there is no power besides the unfathomable love of God. The torturers cannot triumph over their victims.

But why did Jesus have to die? If God loves him so, why has he let him die this way? Why so much humiliation and suffering? What good can ever come from the crime that was committed against him? It took the Christians a long time to find some explanation for something so scandalous and unjust. Around 40 or 42 A.D. they developed a strange formula: «Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures»<sup>71</sup>. But what does the death of one man have to do with all the sinful people of all times? Death is the end of life; how can others be saved by one man's death?

The resurrection forces the early believers to explore Jesus' death in a new light. They have just discovered that on his death, Jesus entered into God's «glory». He died trusting in the Father, and the Father has accepted him into his unfathomable life. What happened to Jesus was a «death-resurrection». He didn't die into emptiness and nothingness, but into full communion with God. The Father has not saved him *from* death, but *in* his death. We might say that in raising him, God has begotten him as his most beloved son. The early Christians found it perfectly natural to interpret Jesus' resurrection in light of a well known psalm: «by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second psalm, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"»<sup>72</sup>. In rising, Jesus is begotten by God into life.

This God who embraces Jesus in the midst of death has never really been away from him. Now in the resurrection we see that while Jesus was dying in agony God was with him, upholding him with faithful love, suffering with him and for him, totally identified with him. The Father does not want to see Jesus suffer. That was never his will. How could he will the unjust destruction of an innocent person? How could he will such a tragic end for his most beloved son? The Father's will is that Jesus remain faithful to the end, that he continue to identify with all the world's unfortunate people, that he seek God's reign and its justice for everyone. The Father does not will an ignominious death for Jesus, and Jesus does not offer his blood expecting it to please him. The early Christians never thought anything like that. Father and Son are united in the crucifixion, not for the sake of blood and destruction, but in confronting the ultimate

consequences of evil. The suffering is evil; the crucifixion is a crime. No one wants it but the Jewish authorities and the representatives of the Empire, who are closed to the reign of God. Jesus does not want them to kill him; he resists drinking that absurd, unjust «cup» of suffering. But he will go to his death if need be, to be faithful to God's reign; everyone will see the depth of his trust in the Father and his love for humanity. For his part, the Father does not want them to kill his beloved Son: nothing they do could hurt him more. But he will let him be sacrificed if need be. He will not intervene to destroy the people who are crucifying Jesus; he will go on loving the world, and he will reveal to everyone the unfathomable depth of his «foolish love» for humanity.

The first Christians said this in amazement: «God so loved the world that he gave his Son»<sup>73</sup>. On the cross, no one is making an offering to God so that he will show a more benevolent face to humankind. It is God who is offering what he loves most: his own Son. His love comes first. Paul is clear about this: «God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us»<sup>74</sup>. There can be no more unequivocal way for God to reveal his love. He doesn't stay his hand, even from what he loves most. «He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?»<sup>75</sup>. This love of God is unheard of. He doesn't do or say anything while Jesus is dying. He doesn't intervene. He respects what they are doing to his Son. He doesn't grant Jesus' anguished plea in Gethsemane. He simply suffers the death of his beloved Son out of his love for human beings, who would otherwise be lost forever. This «crucifixion-resurrection» is the supreme revelation of God's love. No one could have imagined it. In the «crucified-risen» Jesus God is *with* us, thinking only *about* us, suffering *like* us, dying *for* us<sup>76</sup>.

God's silence at the cross never meant he was abandoning the crucified one, or in complicity with the crucifiers. God was with Jesus. That is why, at his death, Jesus was raised in God's arms. The resurrection shows that God was with him in a real way, not intervening against his torturers but assuring his final triumph. That is the most amazing thing about God's love: it has the power to annihilate evil without destroying the evil people. He does justice for Jesus without

<sup>71</sup> 1 Cor 15:3.  
<sup>72</sup> Act 13:33.

<sup>73</sup> John 3:16.  
<sup>74</sup> Rom 5:8.  
<sup>75</sup> Rom 8:32.  
<sup>76</sup> In different ways, with different nuances, today's theologians generally explore the mystery of the cross from this perspective of the sorrow it means for God (Pannenberg, Moltmann, Rahner, Kitamori, Sobrino, Durrwell).

destroying the men who crucified him. Paul says it wonderfully: «In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them»<sup>77</sup>. All this seems incredible. The message of the cross is «foolishness». Paul knows that, for it has brought him constant rejection.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we preach 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<sup>78</sup>.

In that cross which seems like «foolishness» to us, we see the supreme «wisdom» of God finding a way to save the world. In that crucified Christ who seems like «weakness» and impotence, we see the saving «power» of God. That is why the Christians say Christ died for our sins «in accordance with the Scriptures». God's plan has been fulfilled on the cross. «It was necessary» for Christ to suffer. With God it has to be that way, for in his incredible foolishness he loves his children to the end.

The early Christians draw on different models to explain the «foolishness» of the crucifixion in some way. They describe it as a «sacrifice of atonement», a «new covenant» between God and humankind, sealed with the blood of Jesus; they like to compare his death with that of the «suffering servant» in the book of Isaiah, a righteous and innocent man who carries the guilt and sin of others and thus becomes their salvation<sup>79</sup>. We need to understand this language well, because it never denies or distorts the gratuitous love of God which Jesus proclaimed so forcefully.

God does not appear as one who requires Jesus' suffering and destruction in order to satisfy his honor and justice, or to enable him to «forgive» human beings. Jesus does not appear as using his suffering to influence God, to get him to look on the world more benevolently. It never occurs to the early Christian communities to put it that way. If God required the blood of an innocent person to save humanity, the image of the Father that Jesus portrayed would have been totally false. He would be a «vengeful» God who does not forgive gratuitously,

an implacable creditor who cannot save anyone until the debt owed to him is paid. If God were like that, who could love him with all their heart and soul and strength? The best response to such a rigorous and threatening God would be to act cautiously and defensively, making sure to keep him satisfied with all kinds of rituals and sacrifices.

God also does not appear as taking out his wrath on Jesus. The Father never holds him responsible for sins he has not committed; he never thinks of his Son as a «substitute» for sinners. How could a just God impute sins to Jesus that he has not committed?<sup>80</sup> Jesus is innocent; sin has not entered into his heart. He is not suffering any punishment from God on the cross. He is suffering the rejection of those who oppose God's reign. He is not a victim of the Father, but of Caiaphas and Pilate. Jesus bears the suffering unjustly inflicted on him by human beings, and the Father bears the suffering of his beloved Son. That is what we read in a writing attributed to Peter: «He committed no sin... When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross»<sup>81</sup>.

It is love, not suffering, that gives redemptive value to the punishment of the cross. What saves humanity is not some «mysterious» saving power in blood spilled before God. Suffering in itself is evil, it has no redemptive power. It does not please God to see Jesus suffer. The only salvific thing about Calvary is the unfathomable love of God, incarnate in the suffering and death of his Son. There is no saving power outside of that love.

Suffering is still evil, but precisely for that reason, it becomes the most solid and real way to live and express love within human experience. That is why the first Christians saw the crucified Jesus as the most realistic and extreme expression of God's unconditional love for humanity, the mysterious and unfathomable sign of his forgiveness, compassion, and redemptive tenderness. Only the inexpressible love of God can explain what happened on the cross. Only in the luminous

<sup>77</sup> 2 Cor 5:19.  
<sup>78</sup> 1 Cor 1:22-25.  
<sup>79</sup> Especially Isa 53:1-12.

<sup>80</sup> It is hard to interpret one short line from Paul: «For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God» (2 Cor 5:21). He probably intends to emphasize Jesus' solidarity with sinners. Of course we should not take this sentence too literally, because it starts out by affirming Jesus' absolute innocence.

<sup>81</sup> 1 Pet 2:22-24. Sins are something that cannot be carried on one's body. The writer is using an image to express the great weight that falls upon Jesus in his solidarity with those who reject him and God's reign.

shadow of the cross could the Christians make this transcendent and miraculous affirmation: «God is love»<sup>82</sup>. This is Paul's great insight when he writes so passionately about «the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me»<sup>83</sup>.

## *Exploring the Identity of Jesus*

## The Flight of the Disciples

The evangelist Mark does not make the slightest attempt to conceal the dreadful loneliness in which Jesus' life ended. Judas Iscariot, one of the group of the Twelve, handed him over; he made Jesus' nighttime arrest possible. Then, when Jesus was taken into custody, all the disciples left him and fled (Mark 14:50). Only Peter followed at a distance, to the court of the high priest's house. Then he too left Jesus in the lurch—after having denied him. According to Mark, not one of the men from the group of disciples was present at the crucifixion, but some women from among Jesus' followers watched from a distance (Mark 15:40-41).

Jesus' burial was carried out, as we have seen, by Joseph of Arimathea, a Jesus sympathizer but not a member of the group of disciples (Mark 15:42-46). According to Mark, the Twelve took no part in the events at the empty tomb.<sup>1</sup> The oldest tradition associates those events exclusively with the women, especially Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:1-8).

So in Mark we can speak of an accelerating disappearance of the Twelve from the ending of the gospel. How should we interpret their vanishing? Did they simply hide in Jerusalem, so that we may still suppose they were in the city? Or did they leave Judea and flee to their homeland in Galilee? There are two texts that favor flight. The first is Mark 14:27, where Jesus, quoting Zechariah 13:7, says, "You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'" This text speaks about the scattering of the disciples in a kind of epic anticipation that, however, is historically retrospective. "Scattering"—that seems meant to say more than merely concealment in the capital city. A second text, John 16:32, says much the same. There Jesus prophesies, "The hour is coming; indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his [home], and you will leave me alone." This text too acquires its historical force only if we see it as retrospective. The translators of the NRSV have expanded the Greek expression "each to his own" to read "each one to his home," which captures the meaning; an alternate translation would be "each to his private interests." But that means that the disciples have fled, returned pell-mell to their homeland, and they have resumed their former occupations.<sup>2</sup>

But at this point we need also to take note of Mark 16:7 (cf. 14:28), where an angel orders the women, "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." Lived history lies behind these words as well. The disciples—or more precisely the

## Chapter 18

# The Easter Events



This book is about Jesus' public life: What did he do? What did he want? Who was he? Is it even permissible to introduce the Easter events into this context? Shouldn't we stop with Jesus' death? Doesn't something completely different begin with his resurrection—something that can only be grasped in faith?

Such questions are urgent, and yet they only partly touch the reality of Jesus, since ultimately his activities in Galilee and later in Jerusalem can also be understood only by faith. Nevertheless, those matters have to be examined historically. In the same way, Jesus' resurrection belongs to the realm of faith, and yet theology, insofar as it works historically, may and must ask: what really happened among Jesus' followers after Good Friday? How can we understand the phenomenon that they first separated and then came back together again? How can we explain that, despite the catastrophe of Good Friday, they suddenly became a community? That was anything but a matter of course. It was evidently connected to the Easter faith. But how did that Easter faith come to be? And what did it look like in the concrete?

The events after Jesus' death are certainly part of his "life." Without those events he still could not be understood, even if we reconstructed only the external sequence. And within the imponderable history of Jesus' actions, which still goes on, these first days and weeks are a time of special focus. It is this particular period after Good Friday that the present chapter attempts to grasp.

Galileans among them—have gone to Galilee. Why? Evidently because they have fled there. But the angel's words give their flight a positive meaning: the disciples flee and seem thereby to have abandoned Jesus, but in reality he is with them; he is even ahead of them. Precisely in the place where they appear to have lost him forever they will find him: in their home, in Galilee, when they have taken up their old occupations once more.

So Mark 16:7 in particular seems to presume the flight of the disciples to Galilee, and it is completely plausible. Jesus' execution would have had a shocking effect on his followers. As we have already seen, on the basis of Deuteronomy 21:23, "being hanged on a tree" would have seemed like God's judgment on Jesus. From that point of view the confusion of Jesus' associates and the pell-mell flight of the group of Twelve is easily understood. In addition, it was completely possible at the outset that the inner circle of disciples was threatened with a fate similar to that of Jesus himself. What was more likely than that the Galileans would return to Galilee? There they could feel safe; in Galilee they were far enough from the Sanhedrin's grasp.

### The Beginning of the Appearances

One of the surest indicators of the flight of the Galilean disciples to their home country is, in fact, the phenomenon that the appearances to Peter and the Twelve did not take place in Jerusalem but in Galilee. It is true that the gospels give a contradictory picture in this regard: Mark 16:7 announces that the first appearance will be in Galilee, and Matthew 28:16-20 tells of the first appearance to the Eleven, which for him is a summary of all appearances, and locates it in Galilee. Luke, in contrast, places all the appearances in or near Jerusalem. But in doing so he betrays an obvious theological intention: for Luke, Jerusalem is a symbol of the continuity between the time of Jesus and the time of the church.<sup>3</sup> Therefore he omits the angel's order, according to which the disciples should go to Galilee, even though he read it in Mark, which he was using as a model.<sup>4</sup> According to Luke the disciples were to remain in the city (Luke 24:49). He thus says nothing about the Galilean appearances, which very certainly played as great a role in the tradition as did the accounts of appearances in Jerusalem.

John also locates the appearances in Jerusalem, but in this he appears to be directly or indirectly dependent on Luke. Finally, we are faced with the striking phenomenon that chapter 21, an addition to John's gospel,

tells of an appearance in Nazareth. It is not immediately clear what have been the story points clearly to Galilee, where the first appearance of the twelve began.

Here commenced the tradition seen. The first of the texts refers to the appearance to Peter. Two texts favorably cite the faith retained in 1 Cor 15:5, which is part of the faith tradition and

I handed on to you that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, and that he rose again in accordance with the promise made to the twelve.

Probably the ancient tradition is based on the basis of a good

Then he appeared to them one time, most probably in Galilee, he appeared to them in the middle of the night, untimely born.

The second text is found in 1 Cor 15:3-8. The context is the resurrection of the Risen One on Easter Sunday. Immediately after the resurrection, the Risen One appears to the group of Jesus' friends in Galilee. "The Lord has risen from the dead," he says. That Luke does not mention the resurrection in his gospel inserts a formula from the tradition, telling about the resurrection of Jesus, which is not the much more important event. That? By no means! The tradition is that the Risen One appears to Peter available in the tradition that the Risen One appears to the group of Jesus' friends in Galilee that Luke does not mention it. Its neighborhood, where the resurrection took place at the end of the day.

one that Luke with the best will in the world could not shift to the city of Jerusalem. It is true that John 21:1-14 does not tell of an appearance to Peter alone, but the text does clearly reflect the possible milieu of such a story.

So we can with good reason suppose that Peter, who had fled to Galilee with the rest of the inner group of disciples, experienced an appearance of the Risen One there. It banished all doubts and made Peter one of the first Easter witnesses. Apparently the high regard for Peter and his leading role in the early church rested, among other things, on that appearance, which was then followed by further appearance phenomena, including some in Jerusalem.

But before turning to the progress of events, I need first to offer some reflections on the structure of the Easter appearances.

### **The Structure of the Easter Experience**

There is a current position that exercises a certain fascination because it makes things easier for people today. It could be described this way: After the death of Jesus there were no visions or appearances; Jesus' disciples came to their Easter faith through "experience" that, as regards its psychic structure, was wholly within the framework of religious experiences as they are commonly understood. There was nothing unusual or ecstatic about it. The disciples mourned, but in their sorrow the death of Jesus opened itself to them in a new way. They entered into a "disclosure situation."<sup>5</sup> Suddenly they knew that Jesus had not remained in death but was exalted to the right hand of God. God had justified him, contrary to the sentence of his judges in the Sanhedrin. They experienced the nearness of Jesus in their hearts and the grace of his forgiveness. They turned again to the Jesus they had abandoned. Then these "disclosure experiences," in which, of course, things drawn from Scripture played a role, were secondarily fitted into the existing narrative model of "appearances." Originally the Easter experiences had nothing visionary or ecstatic about them.

I consider the position thus described to be *theologically* possible. It would not destroy the Christian Easter faith. It by no means excludes God's action (or the action of the Risen One) in the world. But from a historical point of view this position is untenable. It is a way of currying favor with the Enlightenment mentality, which wants to explain away everything unusual. It is impossible to eliminate the basic structure of a

vision from Paul's Damascus experience, for which we have personal testimony (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8). And the gospels also clearly show that we are dealing with typical phenomena of visions. That of Peter begins a long series of further visions that first affected the group of the Twelve and then a larger group of disciples who were later called apostles, and then no fewer than five hundred followers of Jesus at the same time. This could represent the original Jerusalem community. At some point the visionary phenomena even extended to Jesus' family: it is said of James, the "brother of the Lord" (Gal 1:19), that the Risen One appeared to him (1 Cor 15:7). Finally, Stephen's vision (Acts 7:55) is part of the long series of these early Christian visions.

Not far removed from the modern position of "disclosure experiences" as described above is a much older hypothesis according to which the Easter appearances were "subjective visions." That position can be described somewhat as follows: The disciples simply could not come to terms with the fact that their Lord and Master, Jesus, was no longer with them, and so there arose in their deep unconscious minds an image of a Jesus who returned to them to give them pardon and peace. Added to this was the profound hope for the imminent reign of God that Jesus had planted in them. Could all that be over? No! The desires and fears, the hopes and longings of the disciples were suddenly transformed into a certainty that Jesus had risen. This certainty paved the way for and erupted in visions within their souls in which the disciples saw what they longed for and dreamed of. This purely psychogenic process, extending into the innermost levels of the personality, began with Peter. He then drew his friends along with him by suggestion, and the result was a kind of enthusiastic chain reaction.

Christian faith has always taken its stance against this emptying of the Easter appearances that reduces them to *unusual* but purely *natural* phenomena. In its defense against the position described it has emphasized the supernatural character of the Easter appearances, stressed God's genuine action at Easter, and underlined the true revealedness of the Risen One in the sight of his disciples. So, since the Enlightenment, there have come to be two sharply opposed positions. On the one side it is asserted that the Easter visions were purely natural phenomena produced by the imagination or, more precisely, the unconscious of the disciples. Opposed to this, and in a constantly defensive position, stands the traditional view: no, the Easter appearances were purely supernatural events in which God, or the Risen One, intervened in history through revelation.

But it has become more and more clear that this alternative—either natural or supernatural—is most unfortunate and even *falsely understood*; a theological resolution to this false dilemma is long overdue. It is similar to what we saw in the case of Jesus' miracles: when God acts on people he does not make them passive objects of divine action but acts with and through them. That is, God does not eliminate the structures, laws, frameworks, and potentials of the world but acts with the aid of these and, in common with them. Therefore a *real* vision is both entirely a human production and entirely a work of God.

A genuine vision is first of all totally a human production: it is a bringing into play of the person's history, past experiences, knowledge, hopes, imagination—and all this, obviously, in an unconscious process the person cannot control and in which the styles of the time and culturally conditioned forms of thinking play an important role.<sup>6</sup> The time is long since ripe for acknowledging visions as a genuine human possibility. Then one can likewise take them seriously as also a genuine divine possibility, a way of speaking to human beings within the structures of humanity. For just as every vision is wholly and entirely a human work it can at the same time be wholly and entirely a divine work, as God thereby uses the productive imaginative power of the human in order to reveal God's self in the midst of history.

The principle of the doctrine of grace, that God's action does not suppress human action but instead frees it, must be applied to the inner structure of the Easter appearances. This means that the disciples' Easter experiences can be regarded *theologically* as really and truly appearances of the Risen One in which God revealed his Son in power and in all his glory (Gal 1:16) but *psychologically* at the same time as visions in which the disciples' power of imagination constructed the appearance of the Risen One. By no means does the one exclude the other.

Only if we understand the Easter appearances as thus described do we take them seriously, both theologically and anthropologically. Then we need no longer shrink from the idea that visionary phenomena spread, after Good Friday, in a kind of chain reaction, and that they were altogether inculturated in the respective visual and linguistic abilities of the recipients. We can then understand, for example, how the disciples could "see" and "hear" the Risen One and even "touch" him. The considerations presented in this section are important because they put interpreters in a position to look without historical prejudice at visionary, pneumatic, and ecstatic phenomena in the earliest community and not, out of pure fear of what is unusual, to turn immediately to

magical words such as "legend" or "community construct." The Easter appearance phenomena really happened. That can be determined by purely historical means.

### "Resurrection" as an Imaginative Model

In our inquiry into the structure of the Easter experience we have left one question open: namely, the problem of the imaginative model within which the Easter experience took place. That model must have been present already in the disciples' unconscious. It must have been available as an existing form, an imaginative and linguistic possibility. Otherwise there could have been no perception of Christ at all, and it would have remained unutterable. But what was available in the Judaism of the time with which one could grasp such a profound reality? There were three possibilities:

1. The idea of the "exaltation" by God of a person humiliated by suffering and death. This model is found, for example, in Isaiah 52:13-15: the "servant of God," crushed and pierced, is heard and exalted by God. But Psalm 110 was also an important background: this was about the true king of Israel, who is permitted to sit at God's right hand as God's throne companion and is thus exalted over all his foes.
2. Likewise available was a notion according to which an individual who stood out above others would be swept away from earth by God at the end of his or her life. The history of religions has adopted the concept of "rapture" or "translation" for this. The category of "rapture" also existed in the Old Testament: it is said of Enoch that God took him (Gen 5:24), and there is even a long narrative about Elijah's translation (2 Kgs 2:1-18).
3. Finally, there existed the idea of the general "resurrection of the dead" at the end of time. It is attested only marginally in the Old Testament, in Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2, but it began to play a larger role in the intertestamental literature. At the time of Jesus it had made its way into the thinking of large parts of the population. In contrast to the notions of exaltation and rapture, and also contrary to certain statements of hope in the psalms,<sup>7</sup> this is not about the fate of an individual but about the destiny of the many. And, also in contrast to the ideas of exaltation and rapture, the concept of the

experienced as far more apocalyptic than we would like to think today. Matthew 27:52-53 represents the highly tense eschatological atmosphere of the first days and weeks after the death of Jesus.

### **The Return of the Galileans**

Another phenomenon points in the same direction and can substantiate what has been said thus far. We have seen that the appearances before the Twelve began in Galilee. On that basis we would have to assume that the original community assembled in Galilee and remained there. A number of scholars have, in fact, posited an original Galilean community in addition to the one in Jerusalem, but that has remained simply a postulate; thus far it has been impossible to offer historical proof of an initial community on the Sea of Galilee.

We are, however, faced with the fact that Peter, the Twelve (without Judas Iscariot, of course), and other disciples were in Jerusalem, at the latest on Pentecost. There, and not in Galilee, the first community gathered, and at first it was firmly tied to Jerusalem. Peter and the other disciples did not remain in Galilee. How can we explain their return to the capital city, which was still so dangerous for them?

A primary reason must have been the centering of the end-time events in the holy city, which was a matter of course in Jewish thought. It was from Zion that the conclusive gift of salvation would emanate, and from Jerusalem judgment and resurrection would take their beginning. It must therefore have been almost a necessity for the disciples in Galilee, when they saw the general resurrection of the dead beginning in their visions of the Risen One, to wait for those events in Jerusalem and nowhere else. So, at the latest in time for the feast of Pentecost, they returned with the other pilgrim caravans to the capital city, gathered together, and awaited the progress of the end-time events.

### **The Empty Tomb**

Indeed, there may have been another reason for this return, in addition to the impulse given by the appearances of the Risen One: in all probability not all the disciples had fled to Galilee. Individuals among Jesus' followers and sympathizers had stayed in the capital city, especially those who were less threatened or whose families were resident in Jerusalem. We have firm evidence that a group of women remained in the

city; these included Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:1; cf. Acts 1:14). On the morning of the first day of the week these women went to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body. They probably wanted to make up for what Joseph of Arimathea had been unable to do because of lack of time.<sup>11</sup> But they sought in vain for Jesus' corpse; they found the tomb empty.

That, at any rate, is what Mark says in 16:1-8. His account has repeatedly been called into question. Even in the first century the empty tomb was interpreted as a fantastic invention, a shameless fraud, or a simple mistake. Since the eighteenth century the empty tomb has had it even worse. Enlightened minds repeatedly declare it a legend or part of a great myth.

It is true that the tomb story contains fictive elements. The longer the story was told, the more they multiplied. The "stone rolled away" in Mark becomes in Matthew "an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, [who] came and rolled back the stone and sat on it" (Matt 28:2). Mark's one angel becomes two in Luke (Luke 24:4). And the apocryphal Gospel of Peter describes how Jesus himself emerged from the tomb; his form reached not only to heaven, but beyond (*Gosp Pet* 10:39-40).

But I do not see myself in a position to call the whole story that lies behind Mark 16:1-8 a fiction. There are elements in it that still bear the whiff of real events.

1. First of all, there is the burial by Joseph of Arimathea and thus certain knowledge of the location of the tomb. That knowledge cannot have vanished from the minds of the original Jerusalem community.

2. Then there is the date: the first day of the week. That day would from that time forth play an extraordinary role in the history of the church: the first day of the Jewish week became the Christian Sunday, the "day of the Lord." In the Jewish method of counting this was the "third day" after Jesus' death. The very oldest creedal formula we have speaks of Jesus' being raised "on the third day" (1 Cor 15:4). Where does that date come from? It is not "spun out" of the Old Testament, e.g., from Hosea 6:2,<sup>12</sup> nor does it date the first appearances of the Risen One. The dating on the "third day" can only come from events that took place at the tomb.

3. We should also note that anyone inventing a story from beginning to end would have been very unlikely to make women the witnesses to an empty tomb. In the Judaism of that time women were not

proper witnesses, as is abundantly clear from the resurrection traditions. According to Luke the apostles considered the women's report of the empty tomb "an idle tale"; they did not believe them (Luke 24:11). The following is also very revealing in this context: the attestation of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 speaks only of men, naming Cephas, James, the Twelve, and more than five hundred "brothers." There were most certainly women among those five hundred, but they are not mentioned. Why? Because they were not regarded as qualified witnesses. Likewise unnamed in 1 Corinthians 15 is Mary Magdalene, although Matthew, John, and the "canonical ending" of Mark make it known that she had a vision of the Risen One at the tomb.<sup>13</sup> Luke says nothing about her vision; instead, in his account Peter runs to the tomb to seek proof of the women's testimony (Luke 24:12). All this shows how little value was placed on women's witness in the milieu of the time. From that point of view it is improbable that the early church would have invented a tomb story as a sign of Jesus' resurrection in which women appeared as the witnesses.

4. Finally, we should observe that there was polemic opposition to the story of the empty tomb. Significantly, that polemic never disputes the fact of the empty tomb as such; it is only reinterpreted: the disciples stole Jesus' body or a gardener had transferred it to another tomb.<sup>14</sup> All this presupposes an empty tomb. This supports the historical basis of the tomb story and speaks against the assertion sometimes heard that Jesus was tossed into a mass grave or that his tomb was unknown.

So, until there be proof to the contrary, we should posit an empty tomb that became a sign<sup>15</sup> and a signal for the disciples remaining in Jerusalem. Reports would then have been transmitted to and from Galilee. The coincidence of visionary experiences and the empty tomb led the disciples to a single interpretation of the Easter event, summarized in the statement "God has raised Jesus from the dead." The news of the empty tomb must at first have strengthened the apocalyptic expectations of the Galileans, because the spontaneous opening of graves was part of the general resurrection of the dead. At the same time, however, this news strengthened their resolve to return to the capital.

It has probably become clear long since that this chapter is attempting to make the elevated eschatological expectations of the disciples after

Easter the key to the sequence of Easter events. I do believe that without the end-time atmosphere I have described we can neither correctly order nor understand the sequence of events following immediately on the death of Jesus. Here is another example.

### The Election of Matthias

In Acts 1:15-26 Luke writes that the first order of business within the community was the choice of Matthias to join the group of the Twelve, which was incomplete as a result of Judas's betrayal. We have no reason to question the very ancient tradition on which Luke relies for his account of this election. What is crucial to note is that there was never another such election afterward. It might have seemed like a good thing to augment the Twelve each time one of its members died, and so continue the group as such. But that simply did not occur. Why? The information that the Twelve gradually came to play less and less of a role as a leadership group for the earliest community may not suffice as an explanation. Why did they so rapidly cease to play that role? Apparently because it was not their proper work. The original function of the Twelve within the earliest community was *eschatological* and can be read in Matthew 19:28: "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

During Jesus' lifetime the Twelve were an institutionalized sign of Jesus' focus on the whole of Israel. He made them the official witnesses of his message and the personal symbol of the claims of the reign of God on the whole people of the twelve tribes. That was already a clearly eschatological function, one whose symbolic language was irrevocably linked to the number twelve. If the eschatological-symbolic function of the Twelve with respect to Israel continued after the death of Jesus—and the appearances of the Risen One must certainly have suggested that—then the group of the Twelve had to be augmented and made complete again precisely because of the approaching end-time events. Only in the number twelve was the sign visible, and only in the full power of the sign could the Twelve be witnesses for the Son of Man to Israel at the immediately approaching last judgment.

This offers the simplest explanation for why the group of the Twelve, though quickly restored to its full complement after Jesus' death, was not further augmented in later years: the first and only election took place in that particular historical phase of the earliest community when

## Further Indications

What we have seen thus far could easily be expanded. We would then have to speak especially of baptism, which was practiced from the beginning of the earliest community and appeared as suddenly and abruptly as the experience of the Spirit. It can only be understood phenomenologically as an eschatological sacrament, a saving seal in view of the nearness of the end.<sup>19</sup>

We should also speak of the earliest community's self-perception, recorded in the terms it applied to itself. It would become clear that concepts such as "the saints" (Acts 9:13), "the elect" (Mark 13:19-27), or "the church of God" (Gal 1:13) reveal a fundamentally eschatological structure. They refer to the Israel of the end time, which God has created, chosen, and sanctified for God's self.

Finally, we would have to speak of the celebration of the Lord's Supper, which also points toward the *eschatōn*. The *maranatha*, "Our Lord, come!" (1 Cor 16:22), at worship sounded forth already in the earliest Jerusalem community. When we read in Acts 2:46, "they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts," we are reading of the end-time rejoicing of the community that erupted in their eucharistic celebrations; this is about the overflowing joy of people who rejoice and can be jubilant that in their meals they were permitted to anticipate the eternal banquet with God they expected to encounter in the very near future.

## World-Altering Expectation

But none of that can be pursued here. Even this brief description has probably shown already what approach we need to take if we are to understand the course of the Easter events. Here I will propose only one more question: What happened in the long term to that understanding of Easter, that tense and eager expectation of the Parousia in the first weeks after Jesus' death? Did history invalidate it and lay it to rest? Was it an illusion? Was it all like a grass fire that blazes up suddenly and just as suddenly collapses?

It is helpful, in trying to answer this, if we recall a basic feature of all the appearance accounts. There is not a single Easter narrative in the New Testament that would point our attention to the "beyond," to heaven, to eternal happiness or the disciples' own resurrection. Nowhere in the Easter stories in the gospels do we find the basic idea of many of

today's Easter sermons, meditations, hymns, and petitions: because Christ is risen we can be certain that we will also rise.

Instead, all the Easter texts culminate in the Risen One's sending of the disciples. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," says Matthew 28:19. "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation," says Mark 16:15. In the name of the Messiah "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things," reads Luke 24:47-48. Finally, "as the Father has sent me, so I send you," according to John 20:21. Even Paul said nothing in response to the question of why the Lord had appeared to him except that God "was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles" (Gal 1:15-16). And to round off the whole, in Acts 1:11 the disciples who are staring after the vanishing Christ hear, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" That is, they should not fixate on heaven but be Jesus' witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Matching all these texts is the remarkable circumstance that it was precisely this original Jerusalem community—which, as we saw, expected the return of the Risen One and the end of the world in the immediate future—that stood up before Israel, preaching and missionizing (Acts 2:38-40). The expectation did not falter; rather, it compelled them to gather Israel and lead it to repentance in light of the approaching end. The same can easily be demonstrated in the case of Paul, who in spite of his imminent expectation of the end traveled the Mediterranean world to win as many people as possible for Christ (cf. Rom 15:17-21).<sup>20</sup>

Real, genuine *biblical* expectation of the approaching end does not grow lame, does not allow one to stand idly looking up to heaven, but instead draws our eyes directly to the world and its distress. So it was in the early communities; so it had already been for Jesus. We have seen that his proclamation of the reign of God (cf. chap. 2 above) was tied to the most intense expectation of the approaching end imaginable—namely an expectation that was constantly being fulfilled "today." That kind of expectation knows that it must act because it is about "now," and because there is no time afterward. Every hour is then precious; the time must be used up entirely just because it has an end-time quality. Jesus' purpose was nothing else but to gather Israel in view of the already approaching reign of God and to lead it to repentance.

Jesus' disciples had experienced all that intimately; they had internalized it, and with the appearances of the Risen One it broke out in them

anew. Their urgent expectation of the Parousia was therefore never pointed only to what was to come, but instead, just as in the mind of Jesus, always also to today. This is evident in their idea of the Holy Spirit and the sacraments. In earliest Christianity the Holy Spirit is certainly the beginning of the end time and the deposit on fulfillment, but at the same time that Spirit is the power of God for the new creation of the world. When the Spirit is received and given room in the church, the world will be created anew—toward its perfection.

The sacraments too are eschatological. That is evident in the Eucharist, which is characterized by the cry, "come, Lord Jesus!" and yet this very sacrament binds Christians together as brothers and sisters and so creates new community. Something similar is true of baptism. It is an eschatological sign; it seals one for the end, and yet precisely this sacrament obligates us to a new life in the world. Whoever has died with Christ in baptism is born into the new society of the church. The sacraments contain eschatological dynamite, and yet they are the place where the earliest church made real its present eschatology.

It is against this horizon of the coming of Christ, already being fulfilled and yet again and again delayed, that the anticipatory texts of the New Testament must be interpreted. Then the Easter expectation in Christian communities would mean anticipating that at every hour the Spirit of Christ will show the community new paths, expecting new doors to open at any moment, counting on it that at any hour the Spirit can transform evil into good, hoping at every hour that the impossible will become possible, and never saying "later!" but always "now!" Then the texts of expectation in the New Testament are not something embarrassing, something we need to be ashamed of, and also not something time-bound that we can leave behind us; instead, they are at the center of what it means to be Christian.

From this point of view I would never say that Jesus and the earliest church were misled or disappointed in their imminent expectation. Jesus was profoundly certain that God was acting now, and acting with finality and in unsurpassable fashion. He was certain that in that action God was expressing God's very self in the world, totally and without reservation. This "totality" and "finality" are, however, faced with the fact that human beings normally reject such a "totality" insofar as it applies to themselves and their own response. They do not want to commit themselves definitively but prefer to delay their own decisions and leave everything open for the time being. So there arises a deep discrepancy between God's "already" and the human "not yet." But because God

has expressed God's self wholly and absolutely in Jesus there is no time left for "delaying the decision." Jesus' hearers and the apostles had to decide *now*, in this hour. And they had to decide not only for God's sake but also because of Israel's need and the immeasurable suffering of the world.

I wonder whether, within the eschatological thinking of his world, in which he himself was deeply rooted, Jesus could have formulated and expressed this urgent "now" for decision in any other language than that of imminent expectation.<sup>21</sup> We ourselves stand within an imaginative horizon of endlessly extended time in which there is no genuine *kairos*, but only events. Are we really closer to the truth of our existence and of human history than Jesus, with his eschatological emphasis? I doubt it very much indeed. Obviously we have to translate the eschatological language of Jesus and the early church. When we do, we see that it was not Jesus who was mistaken; it is we who constantly deceive ourselves, not only about the fragility and exposure of our lives, but also about the nearness of God.

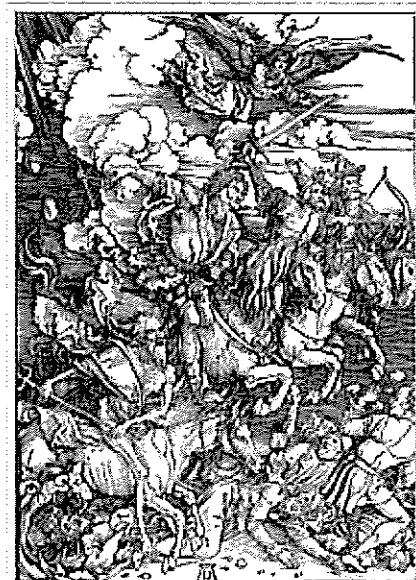
# Eschatology

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Eschatology**  /ˌɛskətɒlədʒi/ (from the Greek *ἔσχατος/έσχάτη/έσχατον*, *eschatos/eschate/eschaton* meaning "last" and *-logy* meaning "the study of", first used in English around 1550)<sup>[1]</sup> is a part of theology, physics, philosophy, and futurology concerned with what are believed to be the final events of history, the ultimate destiny of humanity — commonly referred to as the "end of the world" or "end time".<sup>[2]</sup>

The Oxford English Dictionary defines eschatology as "The department of theological science concerned with 'the four last things: death, judgement, heaven and hell'."<sup>[3]</sup>

In the context of mysticism, the phrase refers metaphorically to the end of ordinary reality and reunion with the Divine. In many religions it is taught as an existing future event prophesied in sacred texts or folklore. More broadly, eschatology may encompass related concepts such as the Messiah or Messianic Age, the end time, and the end of days.



*Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, by Albrecht Dürer.

History is often divided into "ages" (Gk. aeons), an age being a time period with certain commonalities. One age comes to an end and a new age, where different realities are present, begins. When such transitions from one age to another are the subject of eschatological discussion, the phrase, "end of the world", is replaced by "end of the age", "end of an era", or "end of life as we know it". Much apocalyptic fiction does not deal with the "end of time" but rather with the end of a certain period of time, the end of life as it is now, and the beginning of a new period of time. It is usually a crisis that brings an end to current reality and ushers in a new way of living / thinking / being. This crisis may take the form of the intervention of a deity in history, a war, a change in the environment or the reaching of a new level of consciousness.

Most modern eschatology and apocalypticism, both religious and secular, involves the violent disruption or destruction of the world, whereas Christian and Jewish eschatologies view the end times as the consummation or perfection of God's creation of the world. For example, according to ancient Hebrew belief, life takes a linear (and not cyclical) path; the world began with God and is constantly headed toward God's final goal for creation, which is the world to come.

Eschatologies vary as to their degree of optimism or pessimism about the future (and in some eschatologies, conditions are better for some and worse for others, e.g. "heaven and hell").

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