

Four Gospels At Easter

If you read the various accounts of the Resurrection appearances, you find huge differences in its telling, and there is evidence of an editing hand being applied in the interests of unanimity. So

- Mark has an extraordinary ending to his gospel, with *three* women coming to the tomb to finish off the hurried funeral ritual for Jesus. They find within the *open* tomb a young man in white who tells them to gather the Eleven and assure them that Jesus would meet them *in Galilee*. In fact the women come out and tell nobody anything, because they were frightened out of their wits: end of Gospel. (Where, one asks, did the Christian Church come from?)
- Matthew has an angelic rolling-away of the *sealed* tombstone in the sight of the *two* women who come to visit the tomb. This angel also sends the women to guide the Eleven to *Galilee* where they would see Jesus. But then the women themselves meet Jesus, who tells them (redundantly) exactly what the angel has already told them: a clear sign that two sources have been sewn together here. Matthew closes with the story of the silenced guards, and the meeting of the Eleven with Jesus “on a mountain in Galilee where he had arranged to meet them”, where they receive their commission to be apostles.
- Luke has an *indeterminate* number of women coming to the tomb only to find it empty. At this, *two* men in brilliant clothes *suddenly appear* at their side. These reiterate the formula of Christ’s death which he used to predict it, and the women are ordered to tell his disciples. The story is greeted by the disciples as “pure nonsense” and with disbelief; but Peter *runs to the tomb* and *sees the grave-cloths*, but returns home unenlightened and amazed. Then the novelette of the Road to Emmaus is told, with the mourning and truculent disciples finding a stranger beside them who *explained the Scriptures and made their hearts burn within them as he spoke to them*. Then comes the scene of the eucharist at Emmaus, where they *knew him in the breaking of the bread*, and then they return to Jerusalem to find the Eleven, who by this time have come to believe, and report an appearance to *Simon*. Then comes the Lukan appearance of Jesus to the Eleven, who test his *flesh and bones* by touch; he asks for *food* and *eats it*; then he spells out the same *Scriptural lesson* as on the Road to Emmaus. He then tells them to remain where they are - in *Jerusalem* - until they are clothed with the power from on high. They then leave the house for Bethany, where (still on Easter night) he withdraws from them and ascends to heaven, and they return to Jerusalem and praise God continually in the Temple.
- The Fourth Gospel begins with Mary of Magdala going to the tomb *alone* (though she later uses the plural, *we don’t know where they have laid him*.) She finds the tomb opened and empty, and comes *running* to Peter and the Beloved Disciple, reporting a grave-robbery. They go *running* to the tomb (the B.D. wins). Peter enters the tomb and sees the grave-cloths. The B.D. now enters, sees the cloths *and believes*. The Magdalene remains weeping, turns and sees Jesus, thinks he is the gardener and perhaps the author of the removal of the body. He calls her by her name, she knows him, and approaches him: he forbids her to embrace him and tells her he is about to ascend; she must tell the brothers so. She then departs on this errand. There then follow two appearances to the Eleven: one on the evening of Easter Day, and the second one week later

(at which Thomas is present). The Gospel proper ends with that apostle bestowing on Jesus the title “God”, which is the summit of the Church’s faith about the identity of Jesus, here used for the only time in the New Testament.

- The first and the fourth Gospels are equipped with appendices, both in handwriting different from that of the main body they are attached to. Mark’s corrects the impression that no-one ever responded to the angelic order to proclaim the resurrection, by gathering together the stories from the other Gospels which describe this happening. It also includes a single interview between the risen Lord and the Eleven, a meeting full of reproach and rather stern mandates. John’s Gospel is equipped with the story of an encounter by the sea (presumably the sea of *Galilee* - the Easter stories in the main Gospel are all in Jerusalem) where the themes of *feeding* are recapitulated; Jesus feeds the disciples from a barbecue he is running on the beach; and the Lucan story of the miraculous draught of fishes is retold here, with an Easter frame (Luke uses it to frame the calling of disciples, at the very beginning of his Gospel). Then we are told of Peter’s rehabilitation (after his triple denial) and the future life of the Beloved Disciple (whose testimony and inspiration are the foundation of the Fourth Gospel).

It seems clear that the Easter stories have spilled into eternity and out of time and space: it’s therefore unsurprising that the stories themselves should lose precision. Twenty-first century people demand complete historical accuracy; but how are they to be gratified in this case, when the event they want chronicling is something more than temporal?

The Resurrection is still an event which its witnesses want to affirm with total realism: we can see its dramatic effects in the transformation of the lives of those who witness it; but the precise way in which it impacted on them is not describable in strict forensic terms.

- The empty tomb is something about which there is absolute agreement, and the differences in the four accounts make no impact on that central fact.
- That people were aware - almost despite themselves - of encountering the live presence of Jesus, and recognising him, is equally sure.
- The whole overwhelming fact of the Crucifixion, with its defeat and disgrace, had somehow been blown into smithereens by the mode of their encounter, which radiates a serene power, peace, and fulness of life; and the authority of Jesus the risen Christ moves for all of them into a new realm of divine power, in which *they* are enabled to move from their earthly understanding of him into a process which will reveal him as one with the God of Israel. We could identify this last process with the doctrine and celebration which we call “the Ascension”.
- Finally, there is for his disciples an accession to sharing in the risen life of Christ, giving their lives a new unity and direction, which is identified as the reception of the Holy Spirit, and celebrated in the feast of Pentecost. Whether you would describe Pentecost in the terms of Luke’s *Acts of the Apostles*, or in the calmer terms of John’s Easter Night, the meaning does not change. Their souls had passed from the possession of this world, to the reign of God, which he has established in his risen Son. And that is the truth of Easter.

