

The Resurrection of Jesus

Why does it matter?

Admitting potential weaknesses in a discussion, especially when it is heated, is not generally regarded as a strong tactic; which is what makes it all the more interesting and important that the Apostle Paul could write to this the Christian church in Corinth, who were causing him all sorts of worries:

1 Cor 15.17 If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. 19 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Remarkably, Paul opens up the door and looks at the possibility that the Christian faith is just a big mistake, one that leaves Christians as the most pitiful creatures on the planet. What might make that the case? The Apostle's answer is, if Christ has not been raised! In other words, if Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried, simply stayed dead like everyone else, then Christianity would become the biggest hoax ever perpetrated on the human race. The claim of Jesus to have delivered us from our sins would be in tatters, a cruel joke. And even worse, those who have put their eternal destiny in the hands of Jesus, hoping that from him they might receive eternal life, would instead be lost, merely rotting corpses in the ground, without life and without future.

It's worth reflecting on why that is the case. After all, wouldn't there still be religious value in the things that Jesus said and did, even if he was not raised from the dead? The answer to that question all depends on how we understand who Jesus was and what he saw his mission to be. If Jesus was primarily a teacher of moral and spiritual truths, then of course his teaching would live on regardless of his death, and certainly regardless of his resurrection. Or again, if Jesus primarily saw himself as an example for people of how to live the truly human life, worshipping God and serving humanity, then again, that example would continue to inspire people whether he was dead or alive.

But, it is altogether different if Jesus saw himself not merely a teacher or an example, but claimed to be the Saviour of the world, the one in and through whom God was redeeming the world, and saving it from the terrible powers of Evil and death. In that case, a dead Saviour is a failed Saviour, since it is hardly possible that he could save us from death if he himself was defeated by death! Of course, this is precisely how Jesus saw himself, everything he said and everything he did, in his life and most importantly in his death, drips with this conviction.

And what that means, then, is that everything hinges on the resurrection. The Apostle Paul was not overstating it when he said that if Jesus is still in the grave, if it were possible to make that particular archaeological find - the full tomb with the clean bones of Jesus - then Christianity would collapse like a sack of hot air. But the flip side is also true. If Jesus is nothing without the

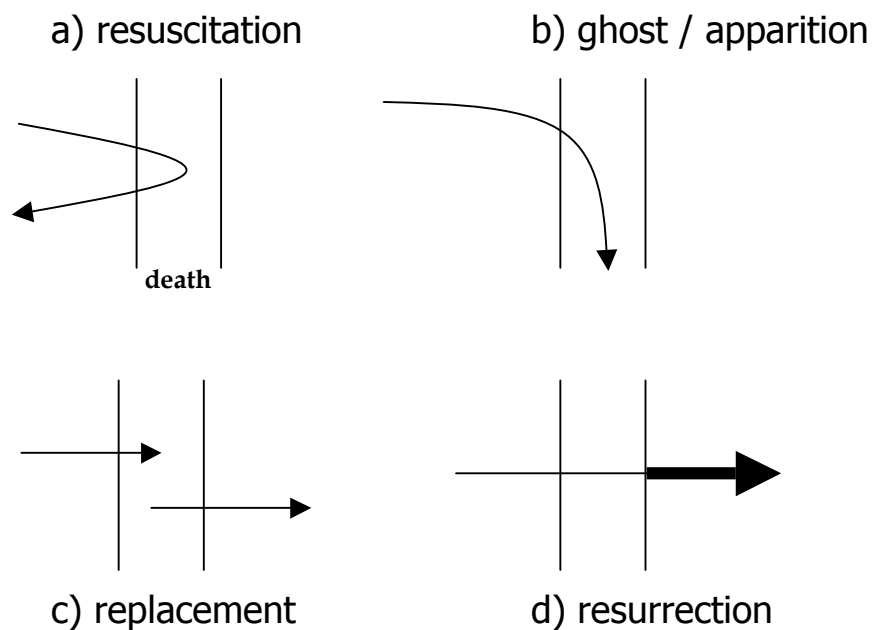
resurrection, then he is everything with the resurrection, not because resurrection is a neat party trick, but because it confirms his status as so much more than a good moral teacher or fine religious example. It provides the best reason in the world for seeing him as the Saviour he claimed to be; and if that's true, then the only thing that makes sense is to declare, as one of his first disciples did upon seeing him for the first time after the resurrection, "My Lord and my God!"

How then are we to understand the resurrection, and what is the evidence that it really happened?

What is being claimed

The first thing to explore is exactly what we're talking about when we read of Jesus being raised from the dead.

What happened to Jesus after he died? There are three inadequate ways to answer that question, represented by the first 3 diagrams below.



- a) On one hand, we can see what happened to Jesus as a resuscitation (**figure a**), what you might call 'an ordinary' resurrection, if there is such a thing! Actually, there were a number of people that Jesus raised from the dead like this; for example, his friend Lazarus, and the son of a widow who lived in the town of Nain. The thing about this kind of 'ordinary resurrection' was that in due course, those people died again, presumably of natural causes in old age. In other words, this constitutes only a temporary victory over death, delaying what is otherwise inevitable. However, Jesus resurrection was different. His resurrection was the defeat of death, not the delay of death - as the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, "Death no longer has dominion over him". No, the resuscitation view of Jesus'

death leaves the fundamental structure of things unchanged, and Jesus simply buried somewhere else some years down the track.

- b) Another view that has been aired from time to time is that Jesus' resurrection was a purely spiritual event. In other words, when the Bible says that Jesus was raised from the dead, what it meant was that, from the dead, Jesus (or perhaps Jesus' memory or power) appeared to his disciples as an overwhelming presence, as some sort of ghost or apparition (**figure b**). On this view, of course, if the disciples had gone to the tomb, they would have found his body lying there just as when the opening to the tomb had been covered over.

John Spong, a well known figure in the United States, understands the resurrection in this way, as something happening that is more happening to the disciples than to Jesus, who remains fundamentally undisturbed – *“Simon saw the meaning of the crucifixion that morning as he had never before seen it, and Simon felt himself to be embraced even with his doubts, his fears, his denials in a way that he had never before been embraced. That was the dawn of Easter in human history. It would be fair to say that in that moment Simon felt resurrected. The clouds of his grief, confusion, and depression vanished from his mind, and in that moment he knew Jesus was part of the very essence of God, and at that moment Simon saw Jesus alive. (Resurrection: Myth or Reality, p. 255)*

However, this is simply a confusion of categories. The early disciples knew about these sorts of visions and experiences. Some time after Jesus was crucified, the Apostle Peter was arrested and jailed as part of a persecution by the king of Judea, Herod Agrippa. However, he escaped, and returned to his friends who were gathered at the house of Mary, the mother of Mark. In a comic scene, while they are praying for him inside, Peter is outside knocking at the door, which is answered by one of the maids of the house, Rhonda. When she recognises his voice, rather than opening the door, she runs inside and tells the group that Peter is at the door. They think she is crazy, and when she insists, they suggest that perhaps it is his angel; in other words, that Peter has been killed, and is appearing from the dead as a ghost or apparition. The point is that the one thing they did not, and would not, call such an event is a resurrection – a resurrection is simply a different thing from a disembodied spirit. N.T. Wright, one of the foremost historians of the resurrection of Jesus explains: *“Resurrection meant embodiment; ... “Resurrection” was not a term for “life after death” in general. It always meant re-embodiment. [...] However strong the disciple’s sense may have been that Jesus had been vindicated, that they had been forgiven, or whatever, they still would not have said he was raised from the dead. [...] something remarkable happened to the body of Jesus. What’s more, re-embodiment is exactly what we see described in Jesus post-resurrection encounters with his disciples (which we will look at in more details later) – Jesus eats food, the disciples touch Jesus, he walks and talks and makes sounds with a voice box and so on. In other words, resurrection simply cannot refer to a visit from the world of the dead of someone safe in the hands of God.*

- c) Another suggestion for the meaning of the resurrection which is closer to the mark, but still inadequate, is that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, but with an entirely new and different body that has no relation to his earthly body; in other words, he received a

replacement body from God (**figure c**) such that the original tomb is still full of the bones of Jesus. However, there are two problems with this. The first is that the consistent, repeatedly evidenced fact is that the tomb was empty, so that the body in which Jesus emerged from the tomb was continuous with the body that went into it. Second, and more deeply, if Jesus emerged from the tomb with an entirely new body, the implication is that the future God has for his world is to discard it and replace it with a new one, just as Jesus' earthly body was discarded and replaced. In that case, ultimately Evil has won the victory, since it has driven an immovable wedge of sin between God and his world. However Jesus came not to destroy the world, but to save it!

- d) No, the Biblical claim of resurrection is that Jesus was raised from the dead in a transformed bodily manner, or what N.T. Wright has termed 'transphysical'. In other words, it is the same person that emerged from the tomb as went into the tomb, the same individual. And what's more, his body was not discarded, but rather transformed, redeemed from the decay and stench of death as the rest of the created order will be redeemed. Such a 'transphysical' understanding of the resurrection is the only view that does justice to the evidence, and in particular the consistent testimony of the eye witnesses that the tomb was in fact empty.

Having clarified what is meant by the claim of resurrection, what then is the historical evidence for such a claim?

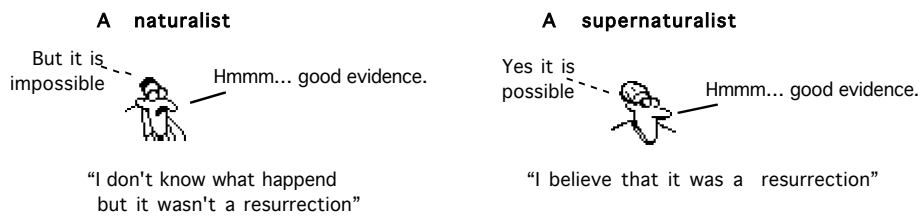
So, what's the evidence?

Before outlining the three strands of historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, it's worth pausing and getting clear what can legitimately be asked of the evidence. As we will see, it is very strong, in fact compelling, but it is not, and cannot be what could be called 'scientific proof'. In the first place, that's not how history works anyway – science is based on repeated experiments which provide testable predictions, and although history repeats itself metaphorically, it can't be done in a laboratory! What's more, with something like the resurrection, a remarkable claim under any circumstances, the crucial issue will be the background beliefs and presuppositions a person brings to the evidence.

What I mean is this. If a person has a set of naturalist presuppositions – say, for example, that all events are explainable by science, that we live in a closed universe where there is no God and therefore there are no miracles – then such a person will look at the evidence, recognise that it is substantial, that the case made is a good one, but in the end, precisely because of those naturalist presuppositions that such a thing is impossible, will conclude that perhaps she doesn't know what happened, but one thing it can't be is a resurrection.

On the other hand, if a person brings to the evidence supernaturalist beliefs and presuppositions – say, for example, that there is a God who can intervene in history in such a way that miracles are possible – then such a person will look at the same evidence, with the same degree of critical

inquiry, but because she believes that it is possible, may well conclude that yes, the evidence justifies the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. We can see our two friends below!



Philosopher and historian William Lane Craig makes the point this way:

"I would argue that the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead is not at all improbable. In fact, based on the evidence, it's the best explanation for what happened. What is improbable is the hypothesis that Jesus rose naturally from the dead. That, I would agree, is outlandish. Any hypothesis would be more probable than saying that the corpse of Jesus spontaneously came back to life. But the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead doesn't contradict science or any known facts of experience. All it requires is the hypothesis that God exists, and I think there are good independent reasons for believing that he does. As long as the evidence of God is even possible, it's possible that he acted in history by raising Jesus from the dead."

The point is, the same evidence can be evaluated with the same historically responsible approach, and yet result in two different conclusions, since it is interpreted through the grid of different presuppositions. In a sense then, the first question to ask as we come to the evidence for the resurrection is: what are my presuppositions? What kind of evidence would it take to persuade me that Jesus rose from the dead? Am I really open to such a thing, though of course it would take a lot to convince me? Or have I already in effect made up my mind before judging the evidence, since 'I just know that these sorts of things can't happen'?

With the issue presuppositions on the table, then, what are the facts that need to be taken into account? There are three inter-related strands of evidence.

a) the empty tomb

That Jesus was crucified during the years (AD 26-36) that Pontius Pilate was 'procurator' (governor of a province of the Roman Empire) is one of the most secure facts of ancient history. What happened next?

Well, of course, the first thing to say is that he died. Although this seems too obvious to be worth pausing over, from time to time the suggestion has been made that Jesus didn't actually die. One version of this is the so-called 'swoon theory', which is put forward in the 1982 book by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (incidentally, this book is suggested as the source book for much of Dan Brown's, *The Da Vinci Code*), and also by Barbara

Thiering in her book *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. According to this theory, Jesus only fainted (or swooned) on the cross, but the Roman guards who were in attendance mistook this for death, took his body from the cross, after which he was laid in the tomb. However, from there he recovered, freed himself from his grave clothes, removed the tombstone, overpowered the Roman guards, and walked away to live happily (or otherwise) ever after! The holes in this suggestion are so massive that it demonstrates sadly the lengths to which people will go to avoid the obvious. Not only is it fanciful to imagine that the expert Roman executioners, along with Jewish enemies baying for his blood, were so incompetent as to wrongly think Jesus had died; even more ludicrous is the thought that after the ordeal of being scourged, beaten, and crucified, Jesus made a remarkable recovery and walked away from the tomb, after several days of no food or even water! As the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, acknowledged, "We could not - and still cannot - prove the accuracy of our conclusion." That's an understatement!

Another interesting example of the view that Jesus didn't die is the Muslim proposal that he simply swapped with someone on his way to the cross. However, this is based simply on a religious conviction, and not on historical evidence at all - simply the idea that God could not allow one of his prophets to be crucified, and so it must not have happened! Of course, this is to put the cart before the horse! There is another way to read the evidence; namely, that precisely because Jesus did die in this way, what it means to be a prophet, or even the Son of God, needs to be radically re-interpreted in the light of the actual events of Jesus life and death.

The starting point then is that Jesus died on that Roman cross. The next element in the drama is that he was buried in a tomb owned by a man called Joseph, who was from a town called Arimathea. Although it was common to leave the corpses of crucified people to rot on the cross, this was not always the case, and there are 2 factors which explain why almost all scholars agree the Jesus' burial is virtually certain. The first is the unanimous testimony of the writers of the Gospels that Joseph of Arimathea asked for the body of Jesus. Interestingly, it is acknowledged by the authors of the Gospels that Joseph was a member of the very Council that condemned Jesus, called the Sanhedrin, a kind of Jewish Supreme Court made up of 70 men. However, it's also noted that Joseph was not present when that decision was made. The point is that it's very unlikely such an account, whereby Jesus was given an honourable burial by someone presumed to be his enemy, would be made up. The fact is that the Sanhedrin were well-known public figures, and the risk of exposure from making up such a story would be too great. But there is a second piece of evidence, as well. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul quotes what scholars agree is an early Christian statement of faith, or creed; in describing it he uses a semi-technical term for it, as that which was 'handed on' to him, and which he in turn 'handed on' to the Christians in Corinth. Paul probably received this creed no later than AD 36, on his first visit to Jerusalem, in other words within 5 years of Jesus death. The creed itself is a 4 line summary of the events narrated in the gospels, and corresponds exactly:

1Cor. 15:3 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,
4 and that he was buried,
and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,

5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

This is very early evidence indeed for the burial of Jesus, and for these two reasons (among others), the vast majority of scholars accept the historical reliability of Jesus' burial. In the words of Cambridge academic, J.A.T. Robinson, "the honourable burial of Jesus is one of the earliest and best attested facts that we have about the historical Jesus."

The next recorded piece of the puzzle is that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was visited by a small group of women followers of Jesus early on the Sunday morning following his crucifixion, and they find that the tomb is empty. In itself, this is not so remarkable, and is capable of several explanations. (However, as we've seen, it is essential to the claim that Jesus rose from the dead, since by definition, 'resurrection' meant bodily resurrection, and a bodily resurrection would be impossible without an empty tomb!).

There are several reasons to accept the historical reliability of the account of the empty tomb. The first is that it is part of the very earliest Christian writing about Jesus, and not a later addition. Not only does Paul include burial and resurrection in his 4 line reporting of what was 'handed onto' him, that very early creed which necessarily implies an empty tomb; as well, the Gospel of Mark, which most scholars agree was the first of the gospels to be written, also includes the discovery of the empty tomb as part of a single continuous narrative with the crucifixion. In particular, there are a couple of factors that indicate that Mark (or the source from which he is quoting) is very early. One hint is that he never names the High Priest, but rather simply refers to him by title, assuming that he and his readers would know who he is referring to, much the same way as if I simply spoke the Prime Minister; the High priest at the time of Jesus, Caiaphas, held office from AD 18-37, which means that at the latest, Mark's account (or his source) dates to within a half-decade of the death of Jesus. As well, Mark records that the empty tomb was discovered on 'the first day of the week'. What's important about that is that very soon afterwards, the way the earliest church came to refer to the day of resurrection was 'the third day'. That Mark uses the older terminology of 'the first day of the week' confirms the very reporting of the tomb being empty - it simply is a not a later fabrication!

Second, the accounts of the empty tomb are straightforward and without legendary development. In this regard, it's interesting to contrast the accounts of the gospels with what are clearly much later versions, not by someone from Jesus' immediate group. In the so-called *Gospel of Peter*, written in the second century, the tomb is not only surrounded by Roman guards but also by all the Jewish Pharisees and elders, as well as a great multitude from all the surrounding countryside who have come to watch the resurrection. Suddenly, in the night there rings out a loud voice in heaven, and two men descend from heaven to the tomb. The stone over the door rolls back by itself, and they go into the tomb. Then three men come out of the tomb, two of them holding up the third man. The heads of the two men reach up into the clouds, but the head of the third man reaches up beyond the clouds. Then a cross comes out of the tomb, and a voice from heaven asks, "Have you preached to them that sleep?" And the cross answers, "Yes." In another forgery called

the *Ascension of Isaiah*, Jesus comes out of the tomb sitting on the shoulders of the angels Michael and Gabriel! This is how legends look; they are coloured by theological and other developments. By contrast, the accounts in the gospels are a simple and straightforward report of what happened.

Third, the tomb was discovered by women. The significance of this is highlighted by the fact that in 1st century Jewish society, women were not regarded as competent legal witnesses, and weren't permitted to testify in a court of law. In other words, it's very unlikely that if the disciples wanted to invent a story about the empty tomb, they would write the story and have women as the discoverers and principle legal witnesses.

And fourth, the earliest Jewish propaganda against the Christians presupposes the empty tomb. In a fascinating passage which gives insight into the political manoeuvring that went on, we see the earliest Christian attempt to refute Jewish propaganda against the Christian proclamation of the resurrection.

Matt. 28:11 While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. 12 After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, 13 telling them, "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

What's significant about this is that in response to the proclamation by the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead, the Jews don't say, 'these people are fools, the body is still where it was laid'. Rather, they try to bribe the soldiers into making the potentially life threatening admission that they were asleep and the disciples stole the body - life threatening since this kind of dereliction of duty was punishable by death! The point is, they don't deny the empty tomb, (nor do they try to indicate where the body might be - THINK MORE ABOUT THIS) they acknowledge it and try to fabricate an alternative explanation!

It's for these reasons that most students of the period and of the New Testament hold to the historical accuracy of the biblical reports of the empty tomb.

In itself, however, an empty tomb doesn't mean that Jesus was raised from the dead. There are a number of potential explanations for an empty tomb, and many have been suggested. What's significant is that none are convincing.

So, for example, some have suggested an early conspiracy theory for the empty tomb, namely that Jesus' disciples stole the body and thereby faked the resurrection. As it turns out, no modern scholar would defend such a theory today, and for good reason. The fact is that most of the disciples later were executed for their faith in the resurrected Jesus, so whatever they were, they were sincere, not fraudsters. The only place this theory is even suggested now is at a popular, prejudiced level. Another suggestion can be equally easily dismissed, and that is that Jesus didn't really die, but that he only swooned, and after later recovering in the tomb, escaped to convince

his disciples that he had been raised from the dead. Not only is this medically impossible, as discussed above, but it is hardly likely that Jesus appearing half dead and in dire need of medical attention would have evoked their worship of him as the risen Son of God! Even more desperate is the suggestion, first proposed in the early 20th century, that there was an empty tomb, but that it was the wrong tomb! In other words, this theory suggests that the women got lost, found an empty tomb and wrongly reported that it was Jesus tomb, and that no one else bothered to verify what they said, neither the other disciples, nor even the enemies of Jesus! It may just be that a theory like that takes even more faith than believing that Jesus was raised from the dead!

The fact is that the empty tomb is very reliably attested from a serious historical perspective, and that the alternative explanations simply don't fit with the facts. But even that doesn't necessarily mean a resurrection had taken place – it could simply be a mystery and a tragedy! However, when added to the second line of argument, the case becomes compelling.

b) appearances

The early 'creed' that the Apostle Paul re-stated to the Christians in Corinth, and which we looked at in the last section, continues on as follows:

... 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

This is a remarkable claim. Here is someone who was personally connected with the first disciples, and he reports that they actually saw Jesus alive; in fact, he says that he also saw Jesus after his death, alive and well. What are we to make of this report?

We have no account in the gospels of Jesus' appearance to Peter ('Cephas' is the Aramaic form of the name 'Peter', whose given name was Simon Peter), although Paul met with Peter in Jerusalem a few years after the crucifixion, and hence would have heard of this event from the horses mouth! In addition, Luke mentions the incident at the close of his gospel (Luke 24.34). On the other hand, the appearance to the twelve disciples is the best-attested resurrection appearance of Jesus, with independent accounts of it in Luke 24.36–42 and John 20.19–20. The thing that stands out about these accounts is the very physical nature of the interactions Jesus had with his disciples – he ate with them, and they touched him. This confirms two things – that Jesus was raised bodily, and that it was the same Jesus who had been crucified. In other words, this is neither a ghost nor a case of mistaken identity.

It is the third on the list of appearances that is most shocking, namely to "500 brothers and sisters at one time". Most likely these were believers in Jesus from the north, in Galilee, which might explain why there is no mention of this in the gospels, where the focus is on Jerusalem. What's particularly interesting is that Paul knew some of them personally. The significance of this large-group appearance is outlined by the great Cambridge University scholar, C.H. Dodd as follows:

“There can hardly be any purpose in mentioning the fact that most of the 500 are still alive, unless Paul is saying in effect, ‘The witnesses are there to be questioned.’” The point is that Paul is highly unlikely to have written this if the event had never taken place and there were no witnesses.

The interesting thing about the appearance to James (who was Jesus’ brother) is that throughout Jesus’ life, his brothers were quite hostile to his claim to be the Messiah - not entirely unpredictable, given how families operate! It is surprising, then, that James emerges in the early church, not only as a disciple of Jesus, but as a leader of the Christian movement in Jerusalem, and who was later stoned to death by the Jewish hierarchy. Of course it’s not proof, but it is entirely consistent with such a remarkable transformation that Jesus had appeared to his brother, thus convincing James of his Messianic status.

Jesus is recorded appearing to his disciples a number of times, although it is not clear which of them is in view in the next element of the creed. Finally, Paul refers to his own experience of meeting Jesus, a remarkable encounter that entirely transformed his life, and led him from being a persecutor of the Christian church, to an Apostle of the Lord Jesus.

The point is clear: the record of numerous occasions on which Jesus appeared to various groups is embedded in the documents of early Christianity. The question is, what can explain these accounts? One answer that has been given is that the appearances didn’t really happen at all, but rather they are legends. In other words, for some reason, there began some rumours about Jesus having risen from the dead, which were told and retold, and which gradually accumulated more and more detail, until they emerge in the form we find them in this creed. However, this is unlikely in the extreme. On the one hand, The fact that the early Christians were very careful about including in their records of Jesus only what was reliable, and (importantly) excluding what was unsubstantiated legend, along with the fact that the claims were obviously testable, since some of the claimed eye-witnesses were alive, should make us wary of attributing this to legend. Fatal to the theory, though is the fact that there was simply insufficient time for such legends to accumulate. Julius Muller puts the difficulty in this way:

Most decidedly must a considerable interval of time be required for such a complete transformation of a whole history by popular tradition, where the series of legends are formed in the same territory where the heroes actually lived and wrought. Here (i.e. in relation to Jesus) one cannot imagine how such a series of legends could arise in an historical age, obtain universal respect and supplant the historical recollection of the true character and connection of their heroes' lives in the mind of the community, if eye witnesses were still at hand, who could be questioned respecting the truth of the recorded marvels.

Professor A.N. Sherwin-White, the highly respected historian of Greek and Roman times, adds that for the gospels to be legends, the rate of accumulation of those legendary elements would have to be "unbelievable".

Another suggested explanation of the appearances is that they did happen, but that they were merely psychological in nature, a kind of extended mass hallucination on the part of the disciples,

perhaps brought on by their extreme grief and loss. However, there are again such overwhelming reasons opposed to this explanation, that it looks like a clutching at straws. The records indicate that Jesus did not just appear to one person but to many; not just once, but many times; not just in one place, but in many; not just to individuals but to groups; and not just to believers, but to unbelievers as well. Hallucinations just cannot plausibly account for these claims. What's more, the accounts of the appearances often include very physical events, eating together, touching and so on, which are unlikely to be the subject of hallucinations.

c) the transformation of the disciples

At the foot of the cross, the disciples were a defeated, pathetic bunch, barely coherent as a group at all. Within weeks of that event, they were taking Jerusalem by storm, with 3000 Jews converted to belief in Jesus, and within months, perhaps 10% of the entire city having become Christian. The historian always asks, 'why?' What could account for this utter transformation?

Those earliest disciples had a clear answer, one on which they staked their lives - Jesus had been raised from the dead, indeed had defeated death itself, and therefore was the living and loving Lord whose authority and saving power needed to be proclaimed to the all the earth. And the question is, why did they proclaim this?

It's here that the previous two points, regarding the empty tomb and the appearances, gain their significance. They constitute together what can be called necessary and sufficient conditions for exactly this belief on the part of the disciples. Both are necessary - an empty tomb without appearances is simply a sad mystery, but by no means does it indicate resurrection; appearances without an empty tomb are unusual, but again, could not and would not indicate resurrection. Both together, however, constitute the necessary and also the sufficient basis for the disciples' belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

As Cambridge University scholar, C.F.D. Moule concludes:

If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes (i.e. the early Christians, called this because Jesus was from Nazareth), a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament (i.e. the fact that we have such a thing as the New Testament indicates that this group did exist) rips a great hole in history, a hole the size and shape of the resurrection, what does the secular historian propose to stop it up with? ... the birth and rapid rise of the Christian church ... remain an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the only explanation offered by the Church itself.

Conclusion

Some years ago, a friend of mine had become completely disillusioned about being a Christian. He felt used, burnt out, and fed up. He went away for a long weekend, determined to party long and hard and forget about the whole religion thing.

However, as he drove along, planning his days of fun without having to bother about Jesus, he realised he couldn't do it. Much to his own surprise, it occurred to him that whether or not he felt

good about being a Christian wasn't really the issue. The fact was that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and that changes things; in fact, that changes everything.

"Jesus rose from the dead, and that changes everything." That's a tidy way to summarise what we've looked at and how it ties in with the all we've investigated about the Christian gospel. If God's great purpose in Jesus is to overthrow the terrible reign of Sin and Evil, and their inevitable consequence, death, then that puts the resurrection of Jesus right at the very core of Christianity. No resurrection, and there is no good news to tell, no gospel to announce, simply another victim for death to chalk up victory over. But if Jesus did rise from the dead, then that changes everything. Suddenly there is one in whom ultimate hope and trust can be placed, as the Saviour who has overcome death, and who has the authority to offer life, life to the full, life that can't be destroyed by death.

That makes it all the more important to do the historical work, and understand the basis for this claim of a man raised by God from the dead. But understanding is only the first step. Understanding without commitment, without connection to this one who has power over death, is just an interesting academic exercise. Ultimately, understanding needs to blossom into genuine personal trust.

P.S. Do the accounts fit together?

If you carefully read the accounts of the events surrounding Jesus' resurrection, you will notice that they differ in some of the details. Some have drawn the conclusion from this fact that the gospel records are contradictory, and therefore not to be trusted.

However, two things need to be said. The fact that these accounts differ in details is not at all surprising; in fact, it actually strengthens the case for seeing the gospels as accurate records of eyewitness accounts, rather than the cleaned up propaganda of people who were fabricating a story. As N.T. Wright puts "it the very discrepancies read like eyewitness reports of the same, confused swift and frightening events."

But second, a discrepancy is a very different thing from a contradiction. Actually, it's quite hard to show that there is a contradiction in an historical account of an event. The different records need to be asserting actually incompatible things about the same people or activities at the same time and in the same place.

In fact, the gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection, though exhibiting some relatively small discrepancies, are not contradictory. Below is a table and then a chronology to help you if you want to work through this issue in detail. They show first the ways in which the resurrection narratives differ from one another, and then how they can fit together in their differences

Table 1: The gospel accounts of the events around Jesus' resurrection

In this table, normal text is used to indicate those events where the gospel accounts agree, and italics are used to indicate where there are differences.

	Matthew 28	Mark 16	Luke 24	John 20–21
1.	Towards the dawn of the first day	When Sabbath was over	On the first day of the week	Early on the first day of the week
2.	Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary	Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome	Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James	Mary Magdalene (<i>alone</i>)
3.	<i>to see the tomb</i>	<i>to anoint Jesus</i>	<i>taking spices</i>	
4.	an earthquake and an angel rolled stone away	found the stone already rolled back	found the stone rolled away	found the stone removed
5.	<i>an angel</i>	<i>a young man</i>	<i>two men</i>	<i>two angels</i>
6.	<i>the guards fall down</i>			
7.		they enter the tomb	went in but no body	
8.	"He is not here for he has been raised, as he said"	"He has been raised he is not here."	"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but risen"	
9.	"Go tell his disciples, he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him"	"Go tell his disciples <i>and Peter</i> that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him"		
10.	They left with fear <i>and great joy</i> <i>They ran to tell the disciples</i>	They went out and fled, for terror and <i>amazement</i> <i>had seized them</i> <i>They said nothing to anyone; they were afraid</i>	They returned from the tomb <i>They told all this to the eleven and all the rest who don't believe.</i>	<i>Mary runs to tell Peter and the other disciple</i>
11.	<i>Jesus meets the two women.</i>			
12.				<i>Peter and the beloved disciple enter the tomb and go home.</i>
13.				<i>Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene who tells the disciples.</i>
14.			<i>Jesus joins 2 disciples near Emmaus. Back in Jerusalem they hear of appearance to Peter.</i>	
15.			Jesus appears to the eleven in Jerusalem	Jesus appears to the eleven in Jerusalem
16.				<i>A week later Jesus appears again to the eleven in Jerusalem with Thomas</i>
17.				<i>Jesus appears by the Sea of Tiberius in Galilee.</i>

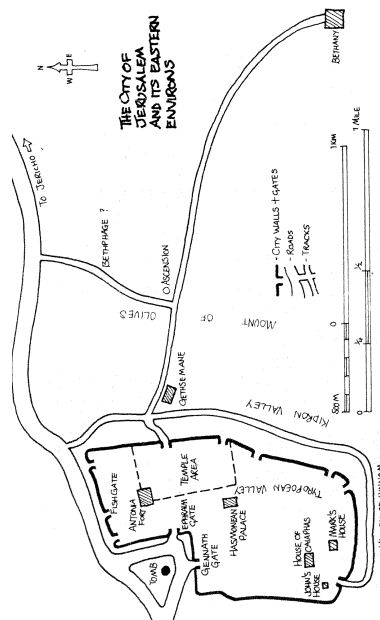
Adapted from G.E. Ladd *I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (1975) p.80–82

Putting it together

Below is a possible chronology for the events of the ‘weekend that shook the world’, including in italics the biblical book that refers to them!

A key assumption is that some people are at Bethany outside the city and that others are at John’s house in Jerusalem.

1. On Sunday some women to the tomb very early. They see the grave open. *Mark/Matthew/Luke/John*
Mary Magdalene runs back to tell the Peter and John *John*
The rest of the women go into the tomb and see the angels. They rush back to the disciples at John’s house. *Mark/Matthew/Luke*
2. Meanwhile Peter and John, followed by Mary Magdalene go to the tomb, but do not meet the others. Peter and John look in and return home. Mary Magdalene remains behind. Jesus appears to her. She returns to John’s house. *John*
3. Other women set out to tell the other disciples in Bethany and Jesus appears to them on the road. *Matthew*
4. Later that day Jesus appears to Cleopas and friend on the road to Emmaus. *Luke* Sometime that day Jesus appears to Peter, though the details are never given. *Luke/Paul*.
5. During that evening Jesus appears to the disciples gathered together. *Luke/John/Paul*
6. A week later Jesus appears to the “Twelve” again, this time with Thomas present. *John*
7. Then in the next week the disciples returned to Galilee. Jesus appears to them while they are fishing and eats breakfast with them. *John*
8. Sometime later Jesus appears to a special large gathering on a mountain in Galilee where he recommissions them. *Matthew*
9. Sometime in Galilee Jesus appears to his unbelieving brother James. *Paul*
10. Back in Jerusalem Jesus appears to “the twelve” in John’s house, tells them to stay in Jerusalem until they are “clothed with power from on high.” He leads them to the Mount of Olives *Luke* There Jesus ascends and is hidden by clouds. *Acts*



← This way up!

Adapted from John Wenham, *Easter Enigma*