

Resurrection

1. *The Witness of the Women*

1. Introduction

Over four weeks, God willing, we are going to look at four witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead: the women, the soldiers, Peter and Thomas.

But before we start, it might be useful to set down core data regarding the resurrection of Jesus.

(a) *No one expected the resurrection – but neither could they refute it*

First, in very broad brushstrokes:

- Jesus was dead and buried.
- The disciples were not prepared for his death; they were overcome with confusion; they had no concept of a dying and rising Messiah (such an idea was unheard of in contemporary Judaism).
- The tomb was found on Easter morning to be empty.
- The tomb was not itself a proof of the resurrection. Mary thought the body had been stolen.
- The disciples claimed that they were met at various times and in various places by the risen Jesus.
- The disciples proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem, near where he had been buried.

(b) *Harmony of the accounts of the resurrection*

More specifically, the four Gospels provide eyewitness accounts of some of the events of the first Easter Sunday and the 40 days following. The following harmonization of the four Gospel accounts has been suggested by G.E. Ladd (*Believe in the Resurrection*, 1979, pp. 91-93).

1. The earthquake and the removal of the stone occur before dawn.
2. A group of four women come early to the tomb, wondering who will move the stone. As they approach, they are amazed to see that the stone has been rolled away.
3. Mary rushes off to tell Peter and John that the body of Jesus has been stolen (John 20:2).
4. The other women stay in the garden. They enter the tomb and are met by two angels, who tell them to carry the word of the resurrection to the disciples. The Gospels call these angels “an angel of the Lord” (Matt. 28:2), “a young man”

(Mark 16:5), “two men” (Luke 24:4) and “angels” (Luke 24:23); this is just the normal variation that we find in the Gospels.

5. The women rush away from the garden, filled with mingled emotions of fear and joy, speaking to no one about the vision of the angels at the empty tomb (Mark 16:8).
6. Later in the morning, Jesus met them (Matthew 28:9 does not say that this meeting occurred in the garden). They had run away from the tomb. Jesus tells them to bear the word to the disciples; they depart to find the disciples, who are not together but scattered (Matt. 26:56).
7. Peter and John, having been informed by Mary, come to the tomb after the women have left. They see the clothes; vague comprehension dawns on John. They rush off to gather the disciples.
8. Mary returns to the tomb after Peter and John have left; they had run to the tomb (John 20:4), leaving Mary behind. She still thinks the body has been stolen. She is weeping outside the tomb, knowing nothing of the experience of the women she had left in the garden. She sees the two angels, then Jesus (John 20:11-17).
9. After the first shock of amazement had worn off, the women find some of the disciples; the disciples cannot believe the fanciful story (Luke 24:11).
10. The disciples have gathered together.
11. Mary arrives and tells her experience (John 20:18).
12. That afternoon, the walk to Emmaus.
13. Sometime that afternoon, an appearance to Peter (Luke 24:34).
14. That evening, Jesus appears to the disciples, who are all together in the closed room. They had been scattered, but the testimony of the women, of Peter and John, then of Mary, serves to bring them all together. Thomas is absent.
15. A second appearance to the eleven, including Thomas.
16. Galilee (Matt. 28:16). The appearance by Tiberias (John 21) and to the 500 brethren (1 Cor. 15:6).
17. Return to Jerusalem; the final appearance and ascension.

2. Women were the first witnesses of the resurrection

No one actually witnessed the resurrection. The stone was rolled back from the opening to the tomb not to allow Jesus out, but to allow witnesses in. Jesus himself had been raised already.

The description of what Peter saw – “the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself” (John 20:6-7) – suggests that Jesus’ body simply passed out through his grave clothes, and out through the rock walls of the tomb. This is consistent with the descriptions of his sudden appearances and disappearances that day, and on subsequent occasions.

All four Gospels record that the first people at the tomb on Easter Sunday morning were women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and some other women, Luke 24:10).

The evidential significance of this is very important.

(a) Women were not considered reliable witnesses

In the ancient world, the witness of women was of little or no value. Indeed, among the Jews a woman had no right to bear witness because it was concluded on the basis of Genesis 18:15 that she was a liar! This is consistent with the way the disciples responded to the witness of the women – their “words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (Luke 24:11).

So the fact that all four Gospels record that the first witnesses were women has the ring of truth. If the resurrection was a story invented many years later, then the Gospels would relate that Peter and the other apostles were the first witnesses. No one would invent a story that made *women* (!) the primary witness. Any airbrushing of original stories would tend to remove the women from the picture.

(b) The women were not biased witnesses

The women went to the tomb expecting to find the body of Jesus:

- they had purchased and prepared expensive spices and ointments with which they planned to anoint the body (Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1);
- they were anxious about how they would remove the heavy stone from the doorway (Mark 16:3);
- when they found the tomb already open and did not find the body of Jesus inside, at least one of them (Mary Magdalene) assumed that it had been stolen (John 20:2,13,15).

In other words, the women did not expect the resurrection. They weren’t predisposed to imagine the experience of an appearance of Jesus.

(c) Women were not witnesses of the wrong tomb

The women were not mistaken about the tomb to which they went:

- they had been at the burial of Jesus just 36 hours previously (Matt. 27:61; Mark 15:47);
- the tomb was marked out by a seal and a guard.

So this wasn't a case of "mistaken identity".

3. What the women saw and were told

Only Matthew mentions the earthquake and the an angel of the Lord rolling the stone away from the door of the tomb (Matt. 24:2). It is probable that this happened before the women arrived at the tomb.

When the women arrived they found the stone rolled back and saw two angels (variously reported as: "an angel of the Lord", Matt. 28:2); "a young man", Mark 16:5; "two men", Luke 24:4; "angels", Luke 24:23).

The angels gently correct the misapprehension and misunderstanding of the women: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay" (Matt. 28:5-6); "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise" (Luke 24:5-7).

The women left quickly with mingled fear and joy (Matt. 28:8; Mark 16:8).

4. Who the women met

As the women made their way back to Jerusalem, they were met by Jesus himself (Matt. 28:9-10). Later on Jesus met Mary Magdalene in the garden where the tomb was (John 20:14-18).

The women bowed in worship before and clung to his feet.

- Jesus' first word to them (his first word to any human after his resurrection) was "Rejoice!" (Matt. 28:15).
- His message (through both the women and later through Mary) to the disciples addressed them as "my brothers" (Matt. 28:10; John 20:17) – the first time in John's Gospel that Jesus calls them "brothers".
- Jesus tells Mary, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:17). DA Carson suggests that what Jesus means is, "Stop holding on to me – I am not yet in the ascended state, so you do not have to hang on to me as if I were about to disappear permanently. This is a time for joy and sharing the good news, not for clutching me. Stop clinging to me, but go and tell my brothers that I am in process of ascending to my Father."

Resurrection

2. *The Witness of the Soldiers*

Only Matthew records the presence of soldiers at the tomb. The fact that they were “hostile witnesses” is most useful.

The account of the guarding of the tomb provides “a suitable final scene depicting the discomfiture of Jesus’ opponents in Jerusalem. They held all the cards of earthly power, including access to the Roman governor, but despite all their efforts they could not contain the Son of God” (R.T. France).

1. **Why the soldiers were there** (Matthew 27:62-66)

The soldiers were at the tomb because the religious authorities were anxious that Jesus’ disciples might try to steal his body.

The chief priests and the Pharisees remembered that Jesus had foretold his resurrection on the third day: “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise’” (Matt. 27:63).

They did not believe that this was possible (nobody did!). But they reckoned that the disciples might try and forge a resurrection: “...lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first” (Matt. 27:64b).

So they requested that Pilate sanction an official guard at the tomb: “Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day” (Matt. 27:64a).

Pilate acquiesced to their request, though it appears from his answer that he did not share the religious leaders’ concern – he probably didn’t provide soldiers, but rather authorized the priests to use their own temple soldiers: “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can” (Matt. 27:65).

On the Sabbath day (Matt. 27:62 – some things are more important than obedience!), the leaders sealed the stone over the tomb and set the guard.

2. **What the soldiers witnessed** (Matthew 28:1-4)

Very early on the first day of the week (the guard had been in place for much less than 24 hours) the soldiers witnessed the angel who rolled back the stone of the tomb. The angel’s appearance – as bright as lightning, which must have been startling in the darkness of pre-dawn – so shocked the soldiers that they “trembled and became like dead men.”

The soldiers were, therefore, not witnesses to what the angel said to the women who came to the tomb.

After the women left the tomb, the soldiers recovered consciousness. They looked into the tomb and were shocked to see the body of Jesus gone. They did not know why his body was missing. They went at once to the chief priests to report what had happened.

3. The stories the soldiers told (Matthew 28:11-15)

The soldiers told two stories: (a) first the true story of what they had seen (Matt. 28:11); and (b) later the fabricated story fed to them by the temple authorities (Matt. 28:13).

The chief priests gathered a quorum of elders and concocted a story about a night time raid on the tomb by the disciples while the soldiers had slept. They instructed the soldiers, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep’” (Matt. 28:13).

Since the soldiers were duty bound not to sleep, the temple authorities had to pay off two parties: (a) the soldiers, for whom the story meant admission of dereliction of duty (Matt. 28:12,15); (b) Pilate, who would not be amused by the way the temple authorities had messed him around since Friday morning (Matt. 28:14).

By implication, the authorities were forced to bear witness that the tomb was indeed empty. They didn't like the fact that the tomb was empty – and they denied that it had been emptied by the resurrection – but they had to acknowledge that the tomb was indeed empty.

After all, if the tomb hadn't been empty, what would the religious leaders have done 40 days later, when Peter preached his first sermon the resurrection of Jesus? They would have directed people to the tomb – they would have pointed to the corruption of Jesus' body. “Look,” they would have said; “here is the body of this so-called crucified Messiah. He was nothing but a fraud.” But there wasn't a body to produce. The tomb really was empty. And the authorities, far from denying it, actually had to bear witness to it. It was a fact.

Moreover, molesting graves was a serious offence in the ancient world. It is highly “improbable that the timid and fearful disciples would have mustered up the courage to open Jesus' tomb and run the risk of [detection and prosecution], or that the Jewish authorities would have failed to prosecute the disciples if they had possessed a scrap of evidence pointing to the disciples' guilt” (D.A. Carson).

4. Why Matthew records the soldiers' testimony (Matthew 27:15b)

Matthew included this story to counter rumours, still current in his day, that Jesus had not risen from the dead but that his body had been stolen by the disciples. Justin Martyr affirms that this story was still being actively propagated more than a hundred years later, in the middle of the second century.

The fact of the rumours witnesses to the emptiness of the tomb. It is a fact that demands an explanation.

“We are given a last glimpse of the discredited Jerusalem regime... The chief priests and elder who have seemed to hold all the cards and who have so smugly celebrated their triumph over [Jesus] are now in total disarray. Their careful plans to get rid of the new Galilean movement have unraveled, and they are left with an embarrassing failure to explain” (R.T. France).

Resurrection

3. *The Witness of Peter*

The witness of Peter is a classic case of providing the only sufficient explanation for the difference between his outlook and behaviour before the crucifixion and after the Pentecost.

1. **Peter before Jesus' arrest**

Before Jesus' arrest Peter was headstrong and self-confident. He was the leader of the disciple group, the spokesman for the Twelve.

Mark 14 records the high point of Peter's arrogance. After their Passover meal, Jesus and the disciples went out to the Mount of Olives. On the way Jesus said plainly, "You will all fall away, for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (Mk. 14:27-28). Notice that he quotes Scripture (Zech. 13:7) to establish his word.

Peter begs to differ! "Even though they all fall away, I will not" (Mark 14:29). Jesus firmly reproves him: "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times" (Mark 14:30). But Peter remains adamant: "He said emphatically, 'If I must die with you, I will not deny you'" (Mark 14:31).

2. **Peter during Jesus' trial**

Peter was strong – but brittle. Moreover, the events that were unfolding were spiritually highly charged (John 14:30; Mark 14:38). Peter was out of his depth – and he was about to know it.

Peter followed the arrest party that took Jesus away. In the light of a brazier in the courtyard of the home of the high priest a servant girl (!) recognized Peter and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it and went out to the gateway (Mark 14:67-68). In the gateway, the servant girl said to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." Again, Peter denied it (Mark 14:69-70). A little later, one of the bystanders said, "Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." And Peter "began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know this man of whom you speak'" (Mark 14:71). But then a cock crowed, and Peter remembered what Jesus had said, recognized his failure, and broke down and wept (Mark 14:72).

Peter was a broken man. We do not read that he was present at the crucifixion. Shame overwhelmed him. It is important to remember that in the ancient world, shame was an exceptionally strong factor.

3. **Peter on the day of Pentecost (and beyond)**

How can it be then that one the day of Pentecost and beyond Peter is able to stand up in public and preach Jesus? Not once, but four times Luke records that Peter boldly announced that: (a) the people whom he addressed were guilty of killing Jesus; (b) God had raised Jesus from the dead; and (c) Jesus was not just alive

again, but alive with a new quality of life, such that he was “Lord and Christ”, the source of life, forgiveness and healing (Acts 2:23; 3:14-15; 4:10; 5:30).

The difference between the Peter of the Gospels and the Peter of the book of Acts is like night and day. But is it authentic?

Yes! The evidence that Acts was written by Luke about AD 62 is very strong. Luke presents Peter in a positive light. It is inconceivable, therefore, that the Gospels were written by any other than eye witnesses. If the Gospels were fabrications, they would certainly present Peter as a hero, not as an abject failure. The difference between the Peter of the Gospels and the Peter of Acts is, therefore, an authentic difference – and it demands an explanation.

4. Explaining Peter’s change

So what explains Peter’s willingness to announce this not just to the people but also to the Sanhedrin? How can the same Peter who denied Jesus when questioned by a servant girl (!) be willing to defy the highest religious court in the land? Why did the Peter who had been filled with shame come to regard suffering dishonour for the sake of Jesus’ name a matter of joy (Acts 5:41)?

Peter’s explanation is that “God raised [Jesus] up, and of that we are all witnesses” (Acts 2:24; see also Acts 3:26; 4:10,20; 5:30-32).

The empty tomb did not change Peter. “Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marvelling at what had happened” (Luke 24:12).

What changed Peter was meeting the risen Jesus: “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” (Luke 24:34).

John is especially fulsome in his reporting of how Jesus changed Peter, after breakfast, on a beach by the side of the Sea of Galilee.

Three times Jesus asked Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (John 21:15,16,17). Three times Peter replied, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Three times Jesus re-commissioned Peter: “Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep... feed my sheep.” The triplication is not an accident. It almost certainly corresponds to Peter’s triple denial of Jesus.

Notice Peter’s change of heart. The old Peter would make protestations of first rank love. But this Peter’s response is modest, confession: “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” Especially in v. 17 Peter’s emphasis is not on him and his love, but on Jesus and his knowledge: “Lord, you, yes you know that I love you.” This is humble, self-effacing, contrite love. “Lord, despite my bitter failure, I do love you. But I’m not going to try and measure my love for you by the love of others. And I’m not going to try and prove my love for you by acts of great self-sacrifice. And I’m not even going to try and protest my love. All I’m can do is confess my love, and rest content in the knowledge that you, yes you know that I love you.”

And having received this confession, Jesus is able to commission Peter as a witness-to-death of his resurrection.

Resurrection

4. *The Witness of Thomas*

1. **The struggle of Thomas's faith**

Thomas was overwhelmed by the sorrow of Good Friday, and he refused to believe the good news without tangible evidence that Jesus was alive.

Now we don't know when Thomas rejoined the disciples – I suppose that it was later in the evening of the first Easter Sunday. And you can imagine the excitement of the other disciples as they related what had happened: "We have seen the Lord." In fact, v. 25 really means, "They kept on trying to tell him, 'We have seen the Lord.'"

But even when Thomas had heard all of this testimony, he still said, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." This is a strong assertion: "Unless I see...unless I touch...I will certainly not believe." It is the refusal of unbelief. Thomas is struggling with faith.

But he isn't a sceptic. All that we know about him suggests a man who was devoted to his Master (e.g. John 11:16; 14:5). Thomas was a man who had loved and listened to Jesus. His hopes and expectations had been pinned on Jesus, and his world had collapsed when Jesus was crucified. We should not be surprised that he could not take in the report from the others that Jesus was alive.

It's hardly surprising that Thomas couldn't take it in. Nothing like this had ever happened before. It doesn't excuse his unbelief. But he wasn't a cool, armchair sceptic who wanted to weigh up all the evidence before he decided what was true. Sometimes faith struggles for air, and we cry out, "Lord I believe. Help my unbelief!"

2. **The nurturing of Thomas's faith**

Thomas was struggling with faith and unbelief. But Jesus – positively bursting with resurrection life – doesn't leave him there. He comes to help him cast off unbelief.

One week passes, and the disciples have gathered and Thomas is with them. Suddenly Jesus is there and issues his resurrection greeting: "Peace to you!" And he turns to Thomas and says, "Reach your finger here, and look at my hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into my side. Do not be unbelieving, but believe."

Graciously Jesus yields to Thomas's demands and shows him the wounds in his body. He is helping Thomas put doubt away and come to full assurance of faith.

Faith isn't a static thing. It is living, and it is capable of growth and maturity. Growth in faith is mandatory – if we don't grow in faith, we will grow in unbelief. Unbelief is both wrong and dangerous. That's why Jesus had to admonish Thomas. Thomas was *wrong* to disbelieve the witnesses appointed by Jesus. Thomas courted *danger* by his unbelief, because unbelief leads to apostasy (see the letter to the Hebrews).

3. The triumph of Thomas's faith

Thomas has struggled with unbelief; but Jesus has nurtured his faith; and now Thomas wins a great victory as he says to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" No more doubts about the goodness of God; no more misunderstanding of his Word; no more coldness towards his people. Unbelief has been vanquished. Faith is triumphant. And in the presence of the risen Jesus, all the pieces fall into place.

- The signs that Jesus had performed: turning water into wine; feeding the 5,000; the raising of Lazarus.
- Jesus' cryptic declarations which his disciples couldn't understand until his resurrection: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again."
- Jesus' great claims: "Before Abraham was, I am."

These all fall into place – Thomas finally understands – and he takes two massive strides. First he recognizes that Jesus is none other than both Lord and God. And secondly, he embraces this fact with joyful submission: "my Lord and my God!"

In John's account of the Gospel, no one had previously addressed Jesus this way. No one had so clearly recognized his deity. No one had so fully surrendered to his authority. This is the triumph of Thomas's faith.

In fact, this is the climax of John's Gospel. John put pen to paper so that we also would come to make the same confession and win the same victory. "Truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

4. The grounds of our faith

We don't have Jesus standing in front of us. We can't feel his breath on our faces, or stretch out our hands and place our fingers in his wounds. No matter. Jesus says, "Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). Rather than the physical presence of Jesus, we have the Bible.

- The Old Testament. Its narratives, the laws, the songs and the prophecies are all about him. Jesus said, "Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44).
- The divinely authorized testimony of the people who were there. "He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth – that you also may believe" (John 19:35).
- The promise that the writings of the eye witnesses are inspired. "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13).
- The promise that if we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, we will have life in and through and because of him. That life – the life of Jesus communicated to us by the Spirit – is, ultimately, the demonstration to us that Jesus risen from the dead is indeed both Lord and God. "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God" (1 John 4:15).