

“RESURRECTION: Myth or Reality?”

**Based on a Book of the Same Title
by Bishop John Shelby Spong**

Session I What does the Bible Say?

In the first half of the first century of this common era, something happened that was to prove so great and so powerful that all of Western history would be shaped by it. That “something” is what has come to be known as the Easter experience in which a non-descript Jewish peasant was said to have been raised from the dead. Something happened, all right, but what it was remains a mystery to many and is the subject of this class.

Paul

The earliest written account of what it was is found in I Corinthians 15. When Paul wrote this, there were no Gospels in existence, no written descriptions of the crucifixion or resurrection in Jerusalem; no empty tomb with angels standing around, or eyewitness accounts of being touched by him, eating food with him, etc. All we learn from Paul was that Jesus died, was buried, was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he then appeared first to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve, then to more than 500 at the same time, then to James, then to all the apostles, and lastly to Paul, himself. That is the sum total of the story as told by Paul some 25-30 years after the first Easter. So where did all of the details that were later incorporated into the Gospels come from, and why were they added to Paul’s basic account?

The first things we should note is that “resurrection” and “resuscitation” have two different meanings. According to N. T. Wright, a distinguished Roman Catholic scholar, resurrection is the reversal of death, its cancelation, the destruction of its power. Marcus Borg, another well-known biblical scholar, says that resurrection has little or nothing to do with a corpse and the resumption of one’s previous life, but with entry into a different kind of existence.

Therefore, whether a tomb is empty or full is basically irrelevant to resurrection and has meaning only in relation to resuscitation. Paul makes clear in his writings (see I Cor. 15) that the resurrected Jesus was not a resuscitated figure of the past, but a radically new spiritual reality in the present who “appeared” to him and others, not as a physical body but as a spiritual body. Our English word “appeared” comes from the Greek *ophethe*, which means “a revelatory manifestation” where one’s eyes are opened to see dimensions beyond the physical. For Paul, Jesus being “raised” from the dead meant that he was elevated or exalted into God’s realm, vindicated by God’s action, and lifted from death to God’s right hand. Only later in Christian history do legends of empty tombs, tales of resuscitated bodies, and ascensions that were cosmic appear in the Christian tradition.

Mark

Mark followed Paul's writings by 15-20 years. It was the first time a written narrative of Jesus' life was attached to the passion story. Mark offered two additions to what Paul had written: (1) the picture of a vacated tomb located in Jerusalem, and (2) a "young man dressed in a white robe" instructing three women to tell Peter and the disciples that Jesus had gone on ahead and that they would see him in Galilee. But according to Mark, the women were struck with fear and went away, telling no one about what they had seen or heard. According to Mark's earlier account, the disciples had fled Jerusalem at the time of the arrest and crucifixion, presumably for Galilee, and it would take time for the legend to grow that would eventually place the disciples back in Jerusalem where they could be portrayed as inspecting the tomb's emptiness and drawing resurrection conclusions. But that transition would not be complete until Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels some 10-15 years later.

Matthew

Matthew has the tomb being the place where the reality of the resurrection actually began. Mark's "young man dressed in a white robe" becomes a supernatural "angel of the Lord" who descends in an earthquake and rolls back the stone. Matthew also has a guard of soldiers at the tomb lest the disciples steal Jesus' body and then claim he had risen from the dead. In Matthew, the women leave the scene, not muted by fear as in Mark, but in joyous ecstasy to tell the other disciples, and then the risen Jesus suddenly appear and one of the women takes hold of his feet and worships him. *This is the first written account in Christian history where the appearance of the risen Christ is described and it comes a full half century after the death of Jesus.*

Matthew has stretched the tomb story enormously by adding the appearance of the risen Jesus. Even though Matthew follows Mark's directive that the disciples are to go to Galilee where they will see him, the emptiness of the tomb has now become the sign of the resurrection and the late-developing tradition that says Easter first occurred in Jerusalem has begun taking hold.

Luke

Writing shortly after Matthew, Luke dramatically transformed the story of the empty tomb. In Luke, the women actually enter the tomb and later vouch for its emptiness. Not one, but two men in dazzling apparel ask them why they seek the living among the dead, declaring of the one they seek: "He is not here but has risen" (Luke 24:5b). With that sentence, Luke changed the language of the resurrection for all time, for no longer was it God who had raised Jesus from the dead but it was Jesus who had raised himself. The empty tomb was now a sign that the deceased had come out of the tomb on his own power and was a walking, talking, eating person back in life as a resuscitated body. The shift from "God and Jesus" to "Jesus who was God" had begun in earnest. It was now left to John to complete the transition.

Luke also changes the location of Galilee as the place where the disciples would see the resurrected one (as stated by Mark and reiterated in Matthew) and has the angel

simply remind them that while Jesus was in Galilee he had told them that the resurrection would occur. In that angelic announcement, Luke also introduced one of his dominant theological themes—that of divine necessity. The Son of Man “*must*” be delivered “*in accordance with the Scriptures,*” the angel said. It was a note that Luke would sound again and again.

Luke has the women return immediately to the disciples *who are still in Jerusalem*, thereby drawing the disciples into the narrative and making them actors in the drama. No longer does the narrative have the feel of an ancient liturgy; instead it has become a literal historical event known as Easter. Luke then has Peter rush to the scene, thereby merging Peter with the empty tomb and reaffirming his preeminence in the hierarchy of the disciples.

Then Luke tells a story found nowhere else in the Bible. It is the story of two disciples on the road to Emmaus who are joined by a stranger who interprets the scripture for them and who, upon being invited to dinner, takes bread, blesses, breaks, and gives it to them to eat, and then vanishes from their sight—and who in the act is identified as the resurrected Christ. Later, back in Jerusalem, the risen one again appears among the other gathered disciples who he invites to examine his physical body and then asks for a piece of broiled fish which he eats in the presence. Then, after walking with them as far as Bethany, he ascends into heaven.

Once Luke has brought a living physical Jesus back from death, he needed some way to explain his eventual departure from the earth so the story of the ascension became a necessity. Found only in Luke and in his companion piece, the Book of Acts, it became the means by which the original passive voice of the resurrection (that Jesus had been raised by God) received its permanent place of lodging in the Christian tradition: *Jesus rose from the grave himself, but he was raised by God into heaven.* The resurrection of Jesus and his subsequent ascension into heaven had become a permanent part of the Christian story and would remain for many a literal, historical fact.

John

In this Gospel, Mary Magdalene is portrayed as the sole woman who comes to the tomb and as the sole mourner. She is reported to have laid claim to the body, an act reserved only for the next of kin, thereby lending support for the notion that she may have been Jesus’ wife. Seeking to embrace the risen one, she is told she cannot hold him because he has not yet ascended to the Father, underlining the importance given by John to the language of ascension, glorification, and exaltation over the language that speaks of the resurrection as a resuscitation to life on this earth.

The next scene is set on Easter evening. The disciples, minus Thomas, were gathered behind closed doors when the Lord in his glorified body suddenly stood among them. After showing them his wounds, he breathed upon them and they received the Holy Spirit. A week later, the disciples were again gathered and this time Thomas was with them. Thomas has insisted he will not believe unless he is able to see and touch the wounds himself. The risen one again appears and Thomas is invited to touch and believe, after which he exclaims, “My Lord, and my God!” Then, speaking to generations yet unborn, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” The Gospel ends with an appendix in which Jesus appears to the disciples one last time by the Sea of Galilee.

Resurrection "myth or reality? By Bill Cummings. Special to The Telegraph. July 09, 2016 09:00 PM. ORDER REPRINT †'. Bishop John Shelby Spong, the retired Episcopal bishop of Newark, New Jersey, wrote a best-seller called: "Resurrection" Myth or Reality. You remember the resurrection myths: A rich man donates the tomb, angels roll back the stone and sit down inside, Jesus walks through walls and yet eats food, and this goes on and on for 40 days. All sacred legends, but, as the bishop says, just legends nonetheless. None of the evangelists who wrote these myths were present on that day. All four of them wrote their gospels 40 to 70 years after the death of Jesus, collecting the different legends that had been building and circulating all those years. Resurrection: Myth or Reality? and millions of other books are available for Amazon Kindle. Learn more. Enter your mobile number or email address below and we'll send you a link to download the free Kindle App. Then you can start reading Kindle books on your smartphone, tablet, or computer - no Kindle device required. Apple. Android. "Without the resurrection the entire Christian faith is pointless"- St Paul accepts that Jesus was God. Resurrection. To rise from the dead. Messiah. The promised deliverer of the Jewish nation prophesied in the Hebrew bible. Chiasm. Figure of speech in which two or more clauses are presented to the reader, then presented again in reverse order to make a larger point. Writing technique to reinforce the idea. The 5 episodes in John chapter 20 are. "For they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead". Jesus appears in the resurrection 3 times. First to Mary Magdalene, then to Thomas, then to the rest of his disciples. The purpose of John's gospel.