



The Story Of Salvation

NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

Andrew Klynsmith and Hank Schoemaker

25. The Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus

“The gospel accounts, while not easy to reconcile, make it clear that Jesus rose, in his own body, from the grave, and that the event had a powerful effect in Jerusalem.”¹ As an introduction to the events and significance of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, it is important to acknowledge that there are differences in the accounts of the resurrection that seem irreconcilable (e.g. one angel or two appearing at the tomb?). Perhaps the best way to understand this is to imagine the impact of the events themselves. Recalling details of what was seen and when may have been somewhat confused by those recalling those events given the awesomeness of what had happened. (By the way, John Wenham in *The Easter Enigma* has a good go at coordinating and synthesising the various accounts.)

What we will do here is concentrate on the common elements in these events, and look at the significance of these events in a salvation history perspective. The relevant passages are **Matthew 28**, **Mark 16** (only vv 1-8 belong to the earliest copies of this gospel), **Luke 24**, **John 20 and 21**, and **Acts 1:1-11**.

1. No one was expecting the resurrection.

Despite all that Jesus told them, not one of the followers of Jesus was expecting his resurrection from the dead. The women went to the tomb with the intention of embalming his body. They were concerned that they would have to roll away the stone sealing his tomb. When they did not find his body there, their first thought was that perhaps somebody had stolen it from the grave (a final act of desecration and humiliation perhaps.) They left the graveside in a state of fearfulness. When they told Peter, James, John and the others, there was general disbelief. Only Peter and John showed any interest in investigating their claims.

Again, what God does goes against human expectation. What he does happens in the most difficult of circumstances. God’s salvation history does not operate by maximising on existing potential! He calls light out of darkness. Bultmann claimed that Jesus’ resurrection was created by the faith of the church; the gospels tell us exactly the opposite, that there was no faith in followers, but rather Jesus’ surprising resurrection brought faith into being.

2. No one actually saw the event of the resurrection.

By the time any of the disciples gathered at the tomb the Lord was already risen. They found an empty tomb. No one, not even the guards who had been posted there, saw him walk out. (Matthew’s account of the earthquake and the rolling back of the stone is not about Jesus being “let out”—the grave could not hold him.)

In this way, the resurrection has all the quality of the creation about the world about it. It is only those who came later that could give testimony to it. Just as the fact of creation

¹ Geoffrey Bingham, *Salvation History*, rev. ed., NCPI:Blackwood, 2008, p. 75

can be known only by faith (Heb. 11:3), so too the fact of the resurrection of Christ. It is as though God sought to absolutely minimise the “star factor” of the event. If he had done the opposite, the resurrection would have fitted our images of greatness. The resurrection of Jesus Christ shows us that in fact we have to understand the greatness of God in another way—not as attention-drawing, but service-giving.

3. The resurrection was real and bodily.

Luke (24:12) and John (20:5-7) both tell about Peter (and John) seeing the cloths used to wrap Jesus lying on the ground in the tomb. John also noted that while most of the cloths had been left where they fell, the head cloth had been carefully folded. The inclusion of these details points to the fact that Jesus’ body had not been stolen. If that were the case, the cloths would have gone with him (given the “uncleanness” of death and all the taboos about having direct contact with a dead body.)

The angels point out that clearly Jesus is not in the tomb. They point to where he had lain, and they say “He is not here; he has risen.”

Jesus was raised *bodily*. The women who met Jesus in the early hours of the resurrection morning were able to grab hold of his ankles (Matt. 28:9). When Jesus appeared to the two disciples on the Emmaus road, he walked, talked, sat and ate with them (Luke 24:13ff). Thomas the doubter was called to put his finger in Jesus’ wounds (John 20:27). “A ghost doesn’t have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (Luke 24:39). He was able to take fish and cook it on fire for his disciples (John 21:9, 12-13).

There were aspects of Jesus’ raised body that do not fit our experience of our own bodies: his *in cognito* appearances, his sudden appearances in locked places. However the gospels do not present Jesus as a spirit or ghost, but rather as a real, bodily man whose body had been glorified. The later teaching of the apostles was that our hope is that he will make our mortal bodies to be like his glorious body (see e.g., Php. 3:21; 1Cor. 15; 1John 3:2).

God’s salvation history is with a view to the renewing of this creation, not the substituting of it with another “new creation”. When Jesus ascended into heaven he took this creation with him, in the dust of the ground from which his body was made. He is the first-fruits of our future inheritance. His resurrection tells us where we are heading.

4. The resurrection was known only believed through being spoken to by the risen Jesus himself.

In each account it a spoken message from Christ himself to bring home to the disciples that Jesus had been raised. The women were told by an angel (or two): “He is not here; he has risen” (Mark 16:6; Matt. 28:5-6; Luke 24:5-6). But Mary Magdalene finally was convinced only when Christ himself spoke to her (John 20:14-18); so too the women returning from the tomb (Matt. 28:8-10). So too, Peter some time between the resurrection and the return of the Emmaus road disciples who had met him as they travelled despondently (Luke 24:13-35); and also all the disciples gathered in the upper room with Thomas seeing a week later (John 20:19-29).

Luke’s account of the Emmaus road points the way ahead for the church. The risen Jesus met, convinced, strengthened and encouraged the two believers through his presence, his opening of the Scriptures, and the breaking of the bread with them. He set the pattern for how he will continue to make his presence, blessing, and power known in the church into the future.

Deeply connected to this appearing and speaking was the assurance of grace to disciples who had failed him: Peter is given an opportunity for a three-fold confession of love for Christ, in place of his three-fold denial; so too the word of peace, the command to not be afraid.

5. The resurrection was shown to be in completion of all that had been prophesied.

The women were chided by the angels, and the disciples by Jesus himself, for their slowness of heart in believing what had been written about all these things in the Scriptures and which he himself had taught to them (Luke 24:5-7, 25-27, 44-46.)

What this means is that the whole plan of God for salvation, spoken of through the whole of the Scriptures, is now being fulfilled. This is a most exciting matter!—the best thing that has ever happened in the world!

6. The risen Lord Jesus commissioned his disciples for the universal proclamation of the gospel.

Apart from Mark, each of the gospel writers records this commissioning of the disciples:

- “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:18-20)
- “This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:46-49)
- “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” (John 20:22)
- “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

God’s determination to bring blessing to all the nations of the earth, signalled at the start of creation when the man and the woman were commanded to fill the earth, and then to Abraham with the promise of the seed through whom all the earth would be blessed, is now brought to sharp focus. Whereas Israel existed as a light amongst the nations, now those who belong to Christ are to be that light *to* the nations.

Further, this ascension of Christ was not his withdrawal from this mission, but rather his ascending to the Father from where, by the power of the Spirit, he would direct and empower the mission. In Matthew we hear him promise *presence*, not *absence*: “And surely I am with you to the end of the age.” In Luke, he promises that he will send the Spirit promised by the Father. At the ascension he lifts his hands in blessing, and as he is blessing them he is taken into heaven. We don’t work on a residue of blessing, but in the continued presence of the Blesser.