

Sermon: Encountering the risen Jesus
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Bible Readings: Acts 9:1-9 John 21:1-14

One of the greatest questions in human history is this: What happened after Jesus died? Obviously something happened, or we would not have the Christian religion, and the world would have been very different.

But what happened, exactly?

I wonder if you could follow me on a bit of a journey that this question demands. You might like to get a Bible out to help us track this together.

Our starting point in answering this question is the 4 books called Gospels gathering into the Bible.

And we must start with Mark. Scholars now agree, mostly, as much as scholars can agree on anything, that Mark was the first gospel to be written. And it was written pretty early, round the year 64, so about 30 years after the death of Jesus, still within living memory of many of those who had been there at the time.

Mark's Gospel is a wonderful narrative, rich in details, starting from the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth. It ends ... actually, exactly where does it end? That's not easily answered. Can you turn with me to page 72. See at the top of the 2nd column it says "An old ending to the Gospel". And down the bottom of the page the footnote says "*Some manuscripts and ancient translations do not have this ending to the Gospel*"

And THEN on the next page, there is "Another old ending" which is really short, it's an alternative verses 9 and 10, written by someone else again!

Oh dear, what!?

The oldest versions of the oldest gospel actually does not include the resurrection, not an actual encounter with the risen Jesus anyway. Bizarrely, Mark's gospel, in its earliest form, finishes at verse 8, on the strangest word – afraid. Mark 16:8

⁸ So they went out and ran from the tomb, distressed and terrified. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

That's it. The end. Surely you can't finish it there, Mark! Maybe he wrote more and the last page fell off. No one through the ages could quite accept that Mark really meant to finish there, with the women too frightened to tell anyone.

So a couple of alternative endings were added to Mark, as you can see here. But they were later.

So, Mark's gospel, with its blunt gloomy ending, was copied and circulated around the early church after the year 64. And over the next few years two men, quite independent of each other, read it and decided to improve on it. Matthew and Luke did not work together, they probably didn't even realize that someone else was tackling the same project.

Matthew copied Mark's gospel pretty accurately, especially the whole crucifixion narrative, and when he gets to the end of Mark he tweaks it just a bit and adds in just a bit.

Can we turn to Matthew 28.

Can you see how he summarises Mark's dramatic sentence about the women running away in a panic, trims down the detail which Matthew obviously thought was a bit OTT ... down to : *So they left the tomb in a hurry, afraid.* Matthew 28:8

and then, he changes it:

⁸ So they left the tomb in a hurry, afraid and yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

And then Matthew adds in Jesus meeting them, greeting them, speaking to them, and the women touching him, embracing him, and being transformed by the joy of the encounter.

Then Matthew includes the intriguing detail about the tomb guard getting a pay-out to stick to the party line about what happened that morning.

And then Matthew concludes his gospel with his most famous lines, which we call the Great Commission, set on a hill top back home in Galilee.

Matthew didn't add these to Mark's gospel just to have a happy ending. He wrote this because he was fully convinced that this was what actually happened. This is how it was remembered by the early church.

Which makes Luke's different version most interesting. What did Luke add to Mark? How does Luke handle the resurrection? Well, what you need to remember about Luke's gospel is that it is only part one. Luke wrote two books, and the second picks up where the first leaves off, at exactly this point.

Luke was a great researcher. His gospel includes stories from other people, and particularly from the women. Luke's resurrection account includes detail from the two Marys, and I believe that Luke met them personally and wrote down their stories. And Luke obviously had met Clopas, and includes that fabulous story of the road to Emmaus.

Luke brings to all his writing a powerful mission agenda, and this shapes the way he writes up the resurrection. Luke places the death and resurrection of Jesus in a long story, beginning at the beginning, emerging out of all the Hebrew scriptures, tangibly present in Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and sent out into all the world for all people.

For Luke it matters that the Christian faith is founded firm on the Jewish faith and then is called out of the Jewish faith. Luke sums this up, chapter 24 verses 44-49, especially 47: *"and in his name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem."*

So it matters to Luke that the early church starts in Jerusalem.

From Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. So in Luke the risen Jesus says to his friends: *"you must wait in the city until the power from above comes down upon you"*

The problem is, the other 3 gospels quite clearly say that the risen Jesus also met with the disciples back home in Galilee. Matthew describes them on a hill-top, possibly the same one where Jesus did the sermon on the mount – he doesn't say but it clearly links back to that, ties it back in to all that Jesus taught. It's not a mountain really, not by New Zealand standards. Symbolically a mountain.

And John? Let's go to John now. And this absolutely fabulous story we have here in John about the disciples fishing and Jesus cooking fish on the beach. Isn't this just a brilliant story. It's washed through with the sharp light of dawn. It's filled with the smell of smoke and cooking fish. You can almost see the sheer water and hear the voices carrying across a still lake. And it rings true at such a deep human level, Peter leaping into the water, everyone's dawning recognition. Just brilliant. Of the 4 of them John had the genius of using the simplest of language to convey the deepest of truth, connecting heart and soul and personality and history.

So, what do you make of this journey into the question about what happened after Jesus died? Do the four gospels hold together for you into a consistent historical narrative? Do the differences between the 4 gospels jar for you?

What do you make of Luke insisting that they all stayed in Jerusalem and waited for the Spirit, while the other 3 describing them traveling back to Galilee and meeting the risen Jesus there in more familiar territory?

Are you unconvinced about the historical accuracy of all the stories, and suspect that the early church made them up to give credence to their inner experience of fresh hope?

This is certainly the position of many biblical scholars and critics through the centuries, and especially in the late 1960s. This was the nub of our very own Presbyterian heresy trial, of Lloyd Geering. Geering, then the principal of our theological college, believed that

“in today’s world the mythical stories of his resurrection and ascension into heaven can no longer be taken at face value.”

The heresy trial was dismissed, and the case closed, but for those of us who do accept the resurrection accounts of Matthew, Luke and John it’s still very much an open case.

Can we take these stories at face value?

I personally find Geering’s attitude quite arrogant, in his claim that we these days are so different from people of 2,000 years ago, that we couldn’t possibly believe their myths.

One person who definitely did not believe the “mythical stories of resurrection” was Saul of Tarsus. Absolutely not. He was not in the least sucked in by the ridiculous rubbish that the Jesus maniacs were saying about how they had met the risen Jesus. Saul was determined to protect the Jewish faith from such heresy. No manner of personal testimony, text or passion was going to shift his world view.

The only way to get through to Saul of Tarsus was literally a bolt from the blue. We heard today the story of the Damascus road, Paul’s encounter with the risen Jesus in an utterly inescapable way. Paul was blinded by the light. Paul was humbled, shaken to the core, cracked open to a whole new way of looking at things. It was the start of an extraordinarily painful and difficult process for Paul, out of which forged some of the most extraordinary truth, teachings and writings in human history. Paul met the risen Christ, and it changed everything.

So, what do I think about all this?

I think that the gospel writers, and Paul, heard first hand from people who met with the risen Jesus in the weeks after he died. I think that they each chose the stories that mattered most to them to write about, and that a lot more happened that didn’t get written down. Their different narratives enrich the truth, for me, rather than detract from it.

I think that during that month or so between Easter morning and the Ascension, that Jesus was alive in a way that has never happened before or since in the history of the universe. I disagree with basic conviction of Geering and liberal thinking which is that if we can’t experience it now then it can’t have happened. I have no problem accepting that something happened at that moment in time that only happened at that moment in time.

Jesus was alive at that time in a way that fully expressed the central claim of the Christian faith, that Jesus Christ was fully human and fully divine. His resurrection body was both a human body, capable of frying and eating fish on a beach, and a spirit body, capable of moving between physical and spiritual reality; earth and heaven trans-sected.

I believe that Jesus Christ is alive in a way which is central to the very nature of the universe, and which is capable of entering our everyday human experience - in a whole host of ways, including a blinding light on the road to Damascus, or a inaudible whisper, in dreams, in conversations, hopefully even here in church.

I have come to know the risen Jesus myself personally. I recognize his character, I know his personality, I can sense his voice, his opinions about things. I feel his strength, his gentle breath, his access to divine power. It's not magic, nothing special about me, it's his Spirit, his character, which is freely offered to all who accept Jesus as Lord. It's an ongoing, and often painful, process of letting God form me and re-form me.

Meeting the risen Jesus was an amazing experience, 2000 years ago. It utterly transformed those who met Jesus in his risen form. And it is a continuing reality that is offered to us now by his Spirit, who comes as light and living word, feeding our souls, renewing our hope, again and again.