

Examining the Meaning of the Resurrection

John Shelby Spong

**Together in Hope ~
Resources for Christian Faith Today**

Examining the Meaning of the Resurrection

John Shelby Spong

Edited and Foreword

by

Adrian Alker

St Marks CRC Press Sheffield

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We hope that these books will be helpful to those individuals and groups, inside and outside of the Church, who are exploring matters of faith and belief.

We are grateful to our authors and encourage others to offer their services.

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Foreword

Bishop Jack Spong has had a remarkable ministry both in the Episcopal Church of the United States, where he was Bishop of Newark, New Jersey until his retirement in 2000, and in the Church worldwide. Jack Spong has consistently called for a fundamental rethinking of Christian belief, especially the traditional theistic understanding of God as evidenced in the doctrines and creeds of orthodox Christianity.

From 1973 to the present day, Bishop Spong's output of books has been prolific as has his tours across the continents, where people have flocked to hear his lectures. Not surprisingly Bishop Spong has provoked much opposition and hostility from more conservative Christian leaders, not least because of his uncompromising support of feminism, gay rights and racial equality within the church and society at large.

Jack is a friend to the four organisations which publish this series of books. He was the guest speaker at the Modern Church conference held before the 1998 Lambeth Conference, when Jack 'nailed' his own twelve points of reformation to the door of the Anglican Communion. He has been an invited speaker on a number of occasions at St Marks CRC in Sheffield, a guest of the Free to Believe conference and a good friend of the Progressive Christianity Network.

In addition to his books, Jack has for a number of years written a weekly newsletter on-line and offers his readers a question and answer dialogue. This remarkably energetic output of essays continues to attract an international readership and is a tribute to Jack's zealous commitment to the promotion of a Christian faith credible for this third millennium.

It is a series of on-line weekly essays that forms the basis of this book.

The Resurrection of Jesus is central to Christian faith and hope for millions of Christians down the ages and across all cultures. Its historicity, nature and significance have been debated since the time of the apostles and scholarly research has not diminished.

1994 saw the publication of Jack Spong's book, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity*. From May to July 2011, Bishop Spong published six essays on line, under the overall title: 'Examining the Meaning of the Resurrection', which revisit his thoughts and convictions about the significant meaning of the Resurrection for today's pilgrims. It is these six essays which form the chapters of this book. They bear the stamp of a continuous dialogue with the on-line readers and should be understood in this framework.

Although this is but one particular way of interpreting the biblical account of the Resurrection (and there are references at the end of the book to other writings which our readers may find attractive), we hope the chapters will provoke interest and discussion about this important tenet of faith and belief. As usual we have appended to each chapter some questions to stimulate such discussion and thought.

The text of these essays has of course remained unaltered apart from minor grammatical changes. Together in Hope is grateful to both Jack and Christine Spong for agreeing with our venture and to the Progressive Christianity Organisation in the USA and its President Fred Plumer for granting us permission to reproduce the essays.

Finally on behalf of many friends and colleagues I hope this publication will be our way of thanking Jack and Christine Spong for their inspiration, encouragement and friendship over many years. Jack's call for Christianity to change or die has indeed provoked many of us in the churches to follow the uncomfortable and yet necessary path of loving dissent. But then Jesus too was a great dissenter!

Adrian Alker, Spring 2012

Examining the Meaning of the Resurrection

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Examining the Meaning of the Resurrection

Part I: Setting the Stage

We begin this biblical probe by examining the books of the New Testament in the order in which they were written, which means we study the New Testament in this order: First, we read Paul (51-64), then Mark (70-72), Matthew (82-85), Luke (88-93) and John (95-100). Only in this way can we watch the story grow and gain insight into its original meaning.

Paul, primarily in his first Epistle to the Corinthians, written ca. 54-56, is very spare in giving us any Easter details. Quite literally the only thing Paul says is that Jesus “was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.” (15.4) Note there is no reference in Paul to a tomb, to a stone being rolled away, to the women coming at dawn on the first day of the week, to a messenger who makes the resurrection announcement and finally no hint of the appearance of Jesus physically at the tomb to anyone. All of these details will be added only in the later gospels. Paul does, however, give us a list of those who, he says, had the raised Christ “manifested” to them, or the list of those to whom the resurrected Jesus “appeared.” The word that we translate “appeared” or was “made manifest” is very loose. Does it mean a physical sighting or a transforming experience? Does it mean a seeing with human eyes or the birth of a new awareness? Is its primary meaning physical sight, second sight or insight? Is it different from the account of Moses “seeing” God in the burning bush? Paul gives us no details. The list of witnesses, however, might provide some clues. So might other texts in the Pauline corpus that cannot possibly be read as physical bodily resuscitation stories.

In Paul’s list, there are six separate manifestations. First Paul says, he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to “the Twelve” and then to the 500 brethren at once. That seems to be the first list. Then a parallel list is recorded in which he appears to James then to “the apostles” and finally to Paul himself. Both sets of witnesses beg more questions than they answer. Cephas is no surprise, he is always listed first among the twelve, and perhaps that position is a direct result of being the first one to “see” the raised Christ. I will examine that possibility later. “The Twelve” is a surprise, but only because Judas is clearly still among them. Paul seems not to know the tradition that one of the twelve was a “traitor.” Judas is first

introduced in Mark (70-72) and when Matthew (82-85) gives the first written narrative of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples, the Judas story has been factored in, so in that gospel Jesus appears only to the eleven! No corroborating data anywhere identifies the “500 brethren” to whom Paul says he appeared “at once” so they continue to be shrouded in mystery. Then in his parallel list he starts with James. Who is he? There are three James’ in the New Testament: James, the son of Zebedee, James, the son of Alphaeus, and James, the brother of Jesus. Which James does Paul mean? The only James that Paul ever mentions elsewhere in his writing is James the brother of Jesus so he becomes our best guess. Then Paul says he appeared to “the apostles.” Who are they? They are clearly not “the Twelve,” who have already been listed. So they have to be a different group, but who? By the time the gospels are written, “the Twelve” are called “the apostles,” but not so with Paul. Finally, please note that Paul claims that he himself was one who also “saw” the raised Christ. Could this possibly mean that the resurrection was conceived of by Paul as a resuscitation of a deceased person? Hardly! Paul’s conversion, according to the best reconstruction that we can put together was no earlier than one year and no later than six years after the crucifixion.

The gospel writers collectively assert that no resurrection appearances in any physical sense took place that long after the crucifixion. Mark tells us of no appearance of Jesus at all, not even to the women in the garden, but he does hint that the disciples will see him in Galilee, which is a 7-10 days’ journey from Jerusalem. Matthew contradicts Mark and says the women did see Jesus in the garden at dawn on Easter day and then he relates a story of Jesus appearing to the disciples in Galilee that appears to come much later and in which Jesus comes out of the sky as one who has been both transformed and glorified. He is clearly not a resuscitated body who has returned to life in this world. Luke says appearances of the raised Christ continued for as long as forty days after Easter and then terminated with the ascension. John says the ascension took place on Easter evening after the tomb was found to be empty by Mary Magdalene that morning, and that the Jesus who appeared to the disciples was an already transformed and ascended Jesus, who was not bound by time and space. Indeed he could walk through walls. So what kind of seeing was Paul talking about when he included himself in his list of witnesses? How are we

to understand this suddenly, rather complicated Easter story?

Easter is obviously not quite as simple as literalists suggest, when they demand that belief in the resurrection must mean belief in the physically raised, resuscitated body of Jesus from the dead. It is clear to me that this is not what the Easter experience was about at all. What is not so clear is what it was about. So that is what I shall seek to explore.

I will take the entire New Testament and search it for clues, remembering that all of the books that constitute the Christian Scriptures were written only in the light of the Easter experience. Not one verse of the New Testament was written prior to Easter and not one verse was written except inside the meaning of Easter. Every word of the New Testament was created 30 to 70 years after the fact of Easter.

I will present my data in response to four very elemental questions that I will ask of my biblical sources. They are: Who? Where? When? and "How? Whatever the Resurrection was, who stood at the center of this life-changing experience? Who was the first to understand? Who opened the eyes of others so that they could understand? Is there evidence throughout the New Testament that points in a single direction?

Where was the crucial person to whom the reality of Easter dawned in the mind of this critical observer? The gospels are divided between Galilee and Jerusalem. Are there other narratives in the New Testament that make it clear that it was one and not the other?

When did this "appearance" occur? Easter may be timeless, but the Easter experience occurs in a human mind at a particular moment of time? Is "three days" a measure of physical time or is it a symbol?

Finally, in what context did Easter dawn? How did this context frame the experience? Can we enter that interpretive context today and see Easter's meaning with new eyes? That is the outline of where I hope to go over the course of these essays.

Something to consider...

- **Paul writes of the risen Christ 'appearing' to Peter, the Twelve, James and many others. How do you think Paul understands this 'appearing'? Is it, as Jack Spong asks, physical sight, second sight or insight?**
- **Do you agree with Bishop Spong that we see the story of Easter 'grow' as the New Testament books came to be written? Or do all the different accounts of the Resurrection of Jesus bear elements of the truth of what happened? Is there a core of agreed acceptance of what constituted the "fact of Easter"?**

Examining the Meaning of the Resurrection

Part II: Who Stood in the Centre of the Easter Breakthrough?

We begin our probe into the meaning of the Easter moment by asking who it was who stood in the center of the Easter experience. People do not always recognize that the claim of revealed truth requires both a revelation and a receiver of that revelation. The revelation may be of a timeless truth, but it has no effect unless someone, who is bound by both time and space, receives that revelation or that new insight and shares it. So who was that person in the accounts of Easter? The message of the New Testament is not unanimous on this question, but a common tradition can be found there that ultimately becomes dominant. Let me now try to lift this dominant tradition out of our sacred story.

Paul, who wrote all of his authentic epistles between the years 51-64, says in his treatment of the final events in Jesus' life (I Cor. 15:1-11, written between 54-56) that he, the raised Jesus, "appeared" first unto Cephas. Cephas was the nickname for Simon, coming from the Aramaic word Kepha, which means rock. When translated into Greek Kepha is rendered Petras and from that the familiar name of Peter was created. This Corinthian text is the earliest reference we have in the entire New Testament to the Easter experience. Paul seemed to be asserting that Simon Peter was a crucial figure standing at the center of the story of the resurrection.

When the first gospel, known as Mark, came to be written about 15-20 years later, we have the earliest narrative account of Easter morning that is found in the New Testament. Mark has a messenger, who is not yet an angel but only a messenger, announce the resurrection of Jesus to the audience of women at the tomb in the garden. In that announcement the messenger says, "Go tell the disciples and Peter that he (Jesus) is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him." Once again, Peter is singled out in a decisive way.

Peter is not mentioned in the resurrection narrative of Matthew, the second gospel writer (82-85), but when Luke writes (88-93), Peter is once more

placed front and center. While Luke relates no resurrection narrative about Peter, choosing instead to relate a story about an unknown man named Cleopas and his unidentified traveling companion on the road to Emmaus, yet just before Luke has Cleopas tell the disciples about his experience, he is told that “The Lord has risen and he has appeared to Simon.” Peter’s primacy is preserved by a hair!

When John, writing near the end of the first century (95-100), tells us his version of the Easter moment, he has Mary Magdalene, not Peter, serve as the star in the drama. Finding the tomb empty and the body missing, Magdalene goes and reports this troubling news to the disciples, who then set out to verify these things for themselves. In the first century, a report by a woman was not credible unless corroborated by a male. So we are told that Peter and the enigmatic figure the Fourth Gospel calls the “beloved disciple” run to the tomb. The beloved disciple outruns Peter and arrives first. There, however, he pauses, waiting at the mouth of the cave, but Peter does not pause so he becomes the first disciple to be confronted by the mystery of the emptiness of the tomb. This starts the process of drawing conclusions.

Next, we note that in the Epilogue to John’s gospel, considered by most scholars not to have been the work of the original evangelist, but to have been added to John’s narrative by another hand and at a later date, Peter is, nonetheless, once again the focus of the drama and of the conversation with the Risen Christ. In this conversation the authenticity of Peter’s love is challenged three times by Jesus and the admonition to feed the lambs or sheep of God is articulated three times by Jesus. As I suggested earlier that while the witness from the Easter stories of the New Testament is not unanimous, these sources, nonetheless, make it clear that Peter plays the primary role in the drama.

With that hint established, we then explore the rest of the gospel material aware that in some sense every verse of the New Testament is written inside the resurrection experience so that resurrection insights might be scattered throughout the entire gospel texts. When we look at the entirety of the gospels, we discover that every time the twelve disciples are named, Peter is always placed first (Mk. 3:16, Mt. 10:2, Lk. 6:14). At Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter is the first one who names him “Christ” or “Messiah” (Mk. 8:39, Mt. 16:16, Lk.

9:20). Matthew states that Peter is the first disciple that Jesus calls (Mt. 4:18). Matthew has Jesus call Peter “the Rock” on whom God will build the church. Peter is the spokesperson for the disciples in the experience we call the Transfiguration (Mk. 9, Mt. 17, Lk. 9). Luke has Jesus say to Peter at the Last Supper, “When once you have turned back, strengthen your brethren” (Lk. 22:32). John portrays the disciples as ready to abandon Jesus after the miraculous feeding of the multitude episode and portrays Jesus saying to Peter: “Do you also wish to go away?” To which Peter responds: “Lord, to whom can we go, you have the words of eternal life?” (John 6:68).

When we search the entire New Testament, Peter emerges at the centre of the Jesus experience, yet there is clearly ambivalence in the biblical portrait of Peter. Peter also denies, Peter wavers, Peter turns again, Peter’s blindness to the meaning of Jesus is not removed easily or quickly, but when the story is told in episode after episode in the gospel tradition, it becomes clear that Peter is the clue to whatever the meaning of Easter is. Peter is the first one who sees. Peter opens the eyes of others to see. Peter strengthens his brethren.

So perhaps we ought to read every Peter story in the gospels as a resurrection story. Peter who walks on the water to Jesus, but who then begins to sink. Jesus has to lift him back and asks, “Peter, why did you doubt?” Peter, who after his Caesarea Philippi confession proceeds to define Jesus in terms of his own needs and limited vision and receives the rebuke, “Get thee behind me Satan!” Peter, who in John’s gospel refuses to allow Jesus to wash his feet and is told that unless Jesus washes his feet, Peter has no part in him. Then Peter blurts out, “Lord, not my feet only” and invites Jesus to wash him all over.

If we can escape the imprisonment of biblical literalism, in which so much of the Christian story has been captured for so long, then we become free to see things we have never seen before. Take, for example, Mark’s story of Jesus healing the blind man from Bethsaida. I submit that this is not a miracle story at all, but rather a parable about the conversion of Peter (Mk. 8:22-30). Recall three things about this story. First, it comes immediately prior to Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus is indeed the Christ. Following that confession Jesus first applauds Peter for his insight and then rebukes him for not understanding his own words. Second, Peter hails from Bethsaida. Third, the curing of this man’s blindness does not

come all at once, but rather it comes in stages, just as Peter's understanding of Jesus seems to have done. At first we are told that the blind man from Bethsaida sees "trees walking" and only later when Jesus has laid his hands on him a second time and has looked at him "intently" was his real sight ultimately created and he was enabled "to see." Luke says that after Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus looked on him (intently?) and Peter wept bitterly. The resurrection, whatever it was, appears to have been an experience that altered the angle of vision and enabled the disciples to see in Jesus something they had never seen in anyone before. Those who claimed that they had seen the Lord in resurrected glory were clearly not saying that they saw the physical Jesus resuscitated to life. They saw Jesus rather as a God presence. They saw Jesus as the life of God breaking into human consciousness. They saw the love of God mediated through a human life. They saw the being of God manifested in the fullness of Jesus' being. It was not physical sight that is being described so much as it was insight or second sight.

Peter appears, however, to have been the first one who saw resurrection and that seeing did not come easily. He had to push against the limits of his understanding of reality, but when Peter's eyes were opened, he opened the eyes of others. Peter, when you are converted, strengthen your brethren.

So our analysis of the resurrection experience yields its first clue. Whatever the resurrection was, Peter stood in the center of it. Once we grasp this insight, every Peter story in the gospels becomes a resurrection story and we can begin to read the gospels with a radically new and different understanding. The resurrection is not so much what happened at Easter, it is what happened first in the life of Peter and then in the lives of the disciples.

So our first clue comes by examining the role of Peter. We will walk through Peter in order to penetrate the mystery and to embrace the power of Easter.

Next, we will seek to answer the "where" question and there face the rival resurrection claims found in the gospels themselves. Did Resurrection dawn in Galilee or did it dawn in Jerusalem?

Something to consider...

- **Jack Spong asserts that Peter was the central person and communicator of the resurrection of Jesus. How do you read the evidence for this?**
- **Spong interprets the healing of the blind man from Bethsaida as a resurrection story about Peter's growing insight. What do you think of this?**
- **Is Resurrection to be understood as a once only event or a gradual process of empowerment by the risen Christ? And what does this mean to you?**

Examining the Meaning of the Resurrection

Part III: Where Were the Disciples When They Saw?

When people have a life-changing experience, they tend to freeze in their minds forever where they were and even what they were doing when the news broke or the new awareness entered their world. I can recall to this day where I was when, as a ten-year old child, I heard the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. When I was thirty two years of age and a young priest, I remember my precise circumstances in which I learned of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Almost everyone in America, but especially those of us who live in the New York City area, can recall where we were and with whom when the recognition dawned that the World Trade Center had been attacked with commandeered commercial airliners being driven into the Twin Towers.

Each of these moments was a shaping experience and each would be lived and relived in our memories for the rest of our lives. The recent navy seal raid on Bin Laden's secret hideout in Pakistan and the death of the planner and perpetrator of this monstrous act caused many to relive that original moment and to recall just how its awareness not only entered, but also shaped our lives.

The New Testament clearly regarded the moment we have named "Easter" as a life-changing experience, indeed so powerful a moment was it that eventually the followers of Jesus decided to make it indelible for all of history by making the decision to view the life of Jesus as the life by which history was itself divided. So all of human history came to be seen and understood as having two distinct parts. There were the years before Christ, which were to be called BC, and the years after Christ referred to as years lived in the power of his ongoing and continued presence, which we called Anno Domini, or AD, "The Year of our Lord."

Given both that human proclivity of remembering and the impact which the first Easter brought to the followers of Jesus, it is surprising, perhaps even amazing, that the New Testament does not seem to know where the disciples were when whatever the experience occurred that we came to call "the resurrection of Jesus." The gospels simply do not agree on the disciples' location when Easter dawned in their conscious awareness.

There are two centers that appear to compete for the honor, one is Galilee and the other is Jerusalem. Let me now go through the available biblical data and lay out the evidence contained therein.

We start with Paul because he is the first author of any book or work that is today contained in the New Testament. Paul, however, turns out not to be particularly helpful. He gives us no location for any of his “witnesses.” All he tells us is that Peter was the first to see and then “the Twelve.” Clearly their natural setting would be Galilee since all of them were in fact Galileans. We are told, however, that they did go to Jerusalem for the Passover so they could have been in Jerusalem. If the connection between Passover and the crucifixion is a liturgical interpretation more than a historical recollection, as I have previously suggested, the argument would be stronger that the “appearances” to which Paul is referring were events that happened in Galilee. The best we can say, however, is that the witness of Paul on this issue is ambivalent and so we move on.

Turning to Mark, the earliest gospel (70-72), we find the anomaly to which I have previously referred, namely, that this original gospel does not relate a resurrection appearance by Jesus to anyone. Mark has only a tomb story that would clearly be in Jerusalem, but at the tomb the women find the grave empty and they hear a proclamation from one who is described only as “a young man in a white robe,” who tells them that Jesus has been raised and who then directs the women to tell the disciples that Jesus “goes before you to Galilee and there you will see him as he said unto you.” The last few words in this quotation refer back to an earlier text in Mark in which Jesus predicts that the disciples will be scattered, but “after I am raised up I will go before you into Galilee.” It is clear that Mark believes that the disciples would and did encounter the risen Christ in Galilee. It is also clear to biblical scholars that Mark’s gospel ends at 16:8 and that both the shorter ending (16:9-10), an account of an appearance to Magdalene, and the longer ending (16:14-20), which recounts an appearance “to the Eleven” are added to Mark many years later, probably in the second century, in an attempt to harmonize Mark with the other gospels. The earliest manuscripts of Mark did not contain these additions and they are universally regarded in the world of biblical scholarship as inauthentic. So we have a probable vote in Paul and an overt suggestion in Mark that Galilee is the place where the disciples are located when the meaning of Easter comes to them and captures them.

Matthew is a further witness to the Galilean tradition. This second gospel, written in the early to mid eighties, however, does contradict Mark, whose gospel he obviously has in hand and from which he draws much of his material, by suggesting that the women saw the raised Jesus at the tomb. That would be a witness to the Jerusalem tradition. Mark had said that they did not. Luke agrees with Mark and says the women did not see him, so Matthew's contrary view is highly suspect. Matthew, however, does agree that it was only in Galilee that "the Twelve" have a resurrection experience. This, in fact, is the first biblical account of the risen Christ appearing to the disciples anywhere. Matthew, having heard by now the story of the defection of Judas, calls them "the Eleven." This Matthean narrative is, however a very strange one. The risen Christ who appears is not a physically-resuscitated body, but rather a transformed and glorified one, and though the ascension story had not yet been written, he is clearly an ascended, heavenly being. He comes out of the clouds to a mountain top. Matthew says that Jesus had directed the disciples to this particular mountain, though there is no indication as to when that direction was given. Then in that Galilean setting, Jesus is said to have given the great commission: "Go into all the world." This was the first time that a suggestion was made that the raised Christ had spoken to anyone. Matthew, though ambivalent, is surely in the Galilee column.

Luke counters the Galilean tradition sharply. The resurrection of Jesus for him is a Jerusalem area only event. In Luke the women do not see Jesus at the tomb, but Cleopas and his unnamed traveling companion experience him in the breaking of bread in the village of Emmaus, less than six miles from Jerusalem. Luke later tells us that the raised Christ has also appeared to Peter, presumably that was also in Jerusalem. Finally, according to Luke, Jesus appears to all the disciples in the afternoon of Easter Day, bids them peace, identifies himself clearly, asks for food to eat, opens their minds to understand the scriptures, directs them to remain in Jerusalem until "empowered" from on high and then departs. Luke specifically denies any Galilean experience connected with Easter.

When we come to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus first appears to Mary at the tomb, then to the disciples that evening in Jerusalem in a locked and barred room without Thomas being present. One week later, still in Jerusalem, John tells us that Jesus appears again to the disciples, but this time with Thomas present. That is where the gospel of John seems to end. Then,

however, we have an epilogue, relating yet another appearance to the disciples, but this time it is much later and it is in Galilee by the Sea of Galilee, and with this narrative the epilogue ends.

That is the biblical data and it reveals significant conflict about where the disciples were, physically, when Easter dawned on them. Paul probably, Mark by inference and Matthew specifically say that the disciples were in Galilee when they “saw” the risen Christ. Luke refutes that and makes the Jerusalem area the sole locale of resurrection. John supports Luke in the Fourth Gospel itself, but in the attached epilogue, the scene is clearly Galilee. With such inconclusive data, our next step is to look at the various accounts of the resurrection in each of the two locales. When we do that the scales begin to tilt toward Galilee for a number of reasons. The Galilean narratives are vague, primitive and mysterious and thus appear to be original. They express something of the stunned and startled response that feels natural in those circumstances. In the Jerusalem narratives, the miraculous has been heightened and the body has become quite physical. The resurrected body of Jesus can even be touched and handled. Only in the Jerusalem stories does the risen Christ do such physical things as eat, walk, talk and interpret scripture. By every measurement, Galilee seems to be original and Jerusalem seems to be a later development.

We have one final test. Remembering that no gospel is written except in the light of the resurrection, we examine some other stories in the gospels that are set in Galilee and which seem to have resurrection themes attached to them. The accounts of Jesus walking on the water and stilling the storm are both Galilean stories. The narrative of the disciples confessing Jesus as messiah has a Galilean setting. Jesus being transfigured before their eyes together with the long-deceased Moses and Elijah is set in Galilee. All of these narratives have a numinous, mysterious quality about them. These are the data that tip our conclusion toward an original Galilean setting. It is far easier to understand how the resurrection experience might have been shifted out of Galilee to the much more prestigious location in Jerusalem, than it is to imagine a shift going in the other direction. Recall that the birth of Jesus, which in all probability occurred in Nazareth of Galilee, was also shifted to Bethlehem near Jerusalem to provide Jesus with a more prestigious place of birth.

Our clues thus begin to be assembled. Peter appears to have been the first

to “see” and thus the first to experience whatever resurrection was. That experience appears to have occurred to him in Galilee. We turn next to the “when” question and examine the meaning of “three days.”

Something to consider...

- **In asserting that Peter and the disciples first came to experience the Resurrection in Galilee, what does this say about the nature of the Resurrection?**
- **Could anyone, at any point in time, have a similar experience?**

Exploring the Meaning of the Resurrection

Part IV: What is the Meaning of Three Days?

First, we asked who stood at the centre of the Easter experience and Peter emerged from our study as the one *in* whom the meaning of resurrection dawned. Then we asked “where” Peter and the disciples were when Easter broke into their consciousness and our study led us to the primacy of the Galilean tradition over the secondary Jerusalem tradition. Now we come to the “when” question. When did this experience occur? Here we begin to confront the unpredictable quality of the familiar symbol: “the third day.” Did the experience of resurrection dawn in Peter on the third day after the crucifixion? If the “third day” is to be treated as a literal measure of time that would place “resurrection” on Sunday as Paul asserts in I Corinthians 15. Recall that this is the first biblical reference to the time of the resurrection. Mark, however, the author of the first gospel to be written (70-72), changes that time reference from “on the third day” to “after three days.” These are conflicting traditions that do not give us the same day. “On the third day” would place the dawning of the resurrection on Sunday, the first day of the week. “After three days,” however, would place it on Monday. While the two phrases sound similar, the two traditions result in contradictory conclusions.

The more wobbly of the two time references appears to be that of Mark. At least, we note that both Matthew and Luke had Mark in front of them when they wrote their gospels. Each of these authors actually wrote expanded versions of Mark, but when they came to Mark’s threefold reference to “after three days,” they each changed it. Matthew changed all three of Mark’s “after three days” references to read “on the third day,” while Luke changed two of Mark’s references and simply omitted the third. Why can they not agree on what seems like so small a matter? What, we wonder, is driving this changing time measurement in the early years of Christian history? I suspect it had to do with liturgy more than with anything else. The first day of the week, or Sunday, was celebrated as the day of the resurrection by the early Christians and so liturgical pressure appears to have driven the memory of the experience. If resurrection were to be observed on the first day of the week then the first awareness of it must have occurred “on the third day.” If the date of the crucifixion was Friday,

the third day had to be Sunday.

The deeper question, however, is what *was* the experience called “resurrection,” which they were describing? Was it an event that occurred inside history? The earliest references to resurrection that we have in the Bible do not, as we have noted previously, seem to think so. Paul, while listing those who are witnesses to the resurrection, never gives us a single narrative detail, yet he includes himself on that list even though his conversion seems to be no earlier than one year after the crucifixion and no later than six years. Later writings in the Pauline Corpus suggest that Paul saw resurrection and ascension as two parts of the same act with neither of them lying inside the bounds of history. For Paul, resurrection clearly did not mean being resuscitated back into the life of this world. It meant rather being raised into the life of God. How can we locate an event in the life of God within the framework of time and space in which human life is lived? So what seems to be described in these early writings in terms of a time reference is not the reality that happened to Jesus, whatever that was, but the time in which a new realization emerged in the minds of the disciples. That does occur within human history. The third day became a synonym for that emergence.

Even that, however, does not clear up the problem. If one insists on reading the gospel narratives literally, the actual time between the burial of Jesus and the resurrection is never more than 36 hours. That is but a day and a half, not three days. The burial occurs shortly before sundown on Friday, which would be about 6:00 pm. From 6:00 pm on Friday until midnight on Friday is six hours. From midnight Friday to midnight Saturday is twenty-four hours. From midnight Saturday until dawn or 6:00 am is six more hours. Put them all together and the best you can get is 36 hours, a day and a half. The symbol “three days” appears to be at best a kind of shorthand description, not a real measure of time.

Then we go to the gospel narratives themselves and look for additional clues. We are surprised to discover that the first gospel to be written never relates a story in which the risen Christ appears to anyone. Mark’s gospel ends at Chapter 16 verse 8, where the messenger directs the women to tell the disciples that they are to go to Galilee and, there in their home region, they will see the raised Jesus. In response, however, Mark tells us that “the women fled in fear and said nothing to anyone.” If we then proceed to

literalize the words of the messenger that the disciples must return to Galilee if they wish to see the raised Jesus, we need to observe that Galilee is a seven to ten day trip from Jerusalem, which means that there would be no resurrection appearance inside the three-day frame of reference.

When we come to Matthew, the problem is the same. Matthew contradicts Mark and says that the women actually saw Jesus and “held his feet” in the garden on the first day of the week. Mark says that the women only saw the messenger and they fled in fear. Luke, written a little later, agrees with Mark. In the third gospel the women do not see Jesus at dawn on the Easter. So it is two to one against Matthew being accurate.

Interestingly enough, Matthew later does describe an appearance of the risen Christ to the disciples in Galilee, but it would have to have occurred after the disciples had returned to Galilee or at least seven to ten days later. Perhaps even more important in this first described appearance of Jesus to the disciples, the Jesus who appears is the already ascended, glorified Lord from heaven, who comes to them out of the sky. This is more a vision of the triumphant Son of Man than it is a narrative about a resurrected body!

The time references become even more mysterious in Luke, who portrays the risen Christ as appearing on Easter evening to Cleopas and his travelling companion in the village of Emmaus in the context of a Eucharistic meal. This Jesus, however, seems to have the ability to materialize and to dematerialize at will. When these Emmaus travelers return to Jerusalem to share what they have experienced, they are greeted by the disciples who proclaim that the raised Jesus “has appeared to Peter,” but no details, other than hearsay, are given. Luke then goes on to assert that Jesus himself appeared on a number of occasions over a period of 40 days and that finally all resurrection experiences ceased with the ascension.

The Fourth Gospel’s witness is also fascinating and confusing. The risen Christ appears only to Mary Magdalene in the garden on Easter morning and there forbids her to touch him for “I have not yet ascended to the father.” By Easter evening, however, that ascension has taken place and any reluctance to any one touching Jesus has disappeared. Jesus then enters their presence in a transformed state. He is able to walk through locked doors to gain access to the disciples and there to breathe into them the gift of the Holy Spirit. He then disappears and does not return until “after eight

days,” which, according to the way the Jews counted time, would be the first day of the second week. On this occasion, however, Thomas is present. Thomas then acknowledges him as “my Lord and my God.” At that point John’s gospel appears to end. There is, however, an epilogue attached to the apparently completed corpus of the Fourth Gospel. This epilogue seems to describe events that were weeks, perhaps even months later, when Jesus appears again, but this time in Galilee where he commands Peter to “Feed my sheep.”

So to return to our question: when did resurrection dawn in the hearts and minds of the disciples? Was it on the third day after the crucifixion? Was it after three days? Was it seven to ten days after the crucifixion when the disciples had returned to their Galilean homes? Was it month’s later when they had actually picked up the pieces of their lives and reentered the fishing trade? These are our options.

I think there was a significant amount of time – probably no less than six months, no more than one year – between the first Good Friday and the first Easter. There had to be time to allow the followers of Jesus to come to an understanding of how a crucified one could still be the messiah. They had to have time to overcome what they believed was the condemnation of the Torah, which pronounced one “cursed” who had been hanged upon a tree. They had to have time to come to the radical new understanding that the life of God can be experienced through a dying man on a cross. They had to have time to search the Hebrew Scriptures to find messianic images where through weakness and death, God could still be seen as life and love.

So, in answer to the question “when,” my suggestion is that Easter dawned some six months to a year after the crucifixion. My third clue thus falls into place. Next we look at what was the context in which the meaning of resurrection moved into human awareness. That is the “how?” question and to that question I turn next week.

Something to consider...

- **How convincing is the writer’s contention that Easter dawned some six months to a year after the crucifixion?**
- **What would be the effect upon the Church and its worship to deny ‘after three days’? Would it diminish belief in the Resurrection?**

Examining the Meaning of the Resurrection

Part V: What Was the Context in Which Easter Dawned?

We come now to our fourth and final question in search of the meaning of Easter. Then with clues, hopefully well established, I will seek to draw some conclusions in the final chapter. We have thus far identified Simon Peter as the person who stood in the centre of the resurrection experience and, if hints present in the gospel accounts themselves direct us properly, he was the one who opened the eyes of others to see what he had seen. Perhaps that is what lies behind words attributed to Jesus and recorded only by Luke where Peter is admonished: “When you are converted, strengthen the brethren” (22:32). We then suggested that if Peter was believed to be the “first witness” then every Peter story in the New Testament might be read as a resurrection story and thus mined for additional clues that are there.

Then, to answer the “where” question, we looked at the biblical records to try to determine the place or the location in which “resurrection” dawned first in Peter and then in the disciples. All of the evidence points to a Galilean setting as primary with Jerusalem being quite secondary. Then we noted that all of the exaggerated resurrection symbols, the stone, the tomb, the guard, the earthquake, the apparitions and the physical body of the resurrected Jesus are connected with that secondary Jerusalem tradition. So authenticity pointed us to Galilee. Once that was clear, we began to read other Galilean stories like Jesus walking on the water and the account of the Transfiguration in search of additional resurrection clues that are there.

Next, in response to the “when” question, we examined the time references in the Easter stories. Was the time between crucifixion and resurrection three days? Or was the phrase “three days” meant to be understood as a symbol for whatever time passed between Good Friday and Easter. To gain insight into that, if indeed it was a symbol, we looked at all the places in the gospels themselves that seem to indicate a greater separation of time between Good Friday and Easter than most of us have ever imagined to be possible. My conclusion was and is that the followers of Jesus collapsed what was originally somewhere between six months and one year into

“three days” and they did it primarily for liturgical purposes. If Friday is observed liturgically as the day of the crucifixion, then Sunday had to be observed as the day of resurrection. That is what the gospels suggested happened even while hinting at vastly longer periods of time between the two.

Now we come to look at the context in which the Easter experience was first encountered. This is the “how” question. Are there echoes of how “resurrection” dawned in the gospel story? I think there are. So into the resurrection narratives of the gospels we now plunge anew in search of answers or at least hints.

St. Paul gives us no help other than to note that within a single generation, the followers of Jesus clearly began to gather on the first day of the week for the breaking of bread and they called that day “The Lord’s Day.” When this custom actually began is hard to pinpoint, but it had to be quite early.

The first two gospels to be written, Mark and Matthew, give us no direct help either, at least not in the narratives that deal specifically with the Easter story. In the earlier parts of these gospels, however, we may find some hints, but we are not able to discern them until we have a better idea of what the original context of the resurrection experience was.

It is a late clue, coming first in Luke, but since it is all we have, we will pursue it. Luke is the only gospel to record the narrative that has come to be called the Emmaus Road story. That story seems to reflect the experience of the followers of Jesus in the days, weeks and even months that followed the crucifixion. Cleopas and his travelling companion were portrayed as living in inner turmoil. They had hoped that Jesus was messiah but now he was dead. In their minds there was no concept of messiah as victim. Jesus, therefore, as an executed one, could no longer make a messianic claim in their minds. Unable, however, to deny their transformative experiences with him, they began to search the scriptures trying to find clues that might give them a new understanding of his death. This is represented in this Emmaus Road story, Cleopas and his companion having the scriptures opened to them by this as yet unrecognized stranger. Finally, with the light of day fading, the Emmaus travelers invited their still unrecognized interpreter of the scriptures to turn aside with them and to share their evening meal. He did so, but in a twist in proper protocol, Jesus,

the guest, became the one who presided over that evening meal and when he gave the ceremonial blessing he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. That was the moment, according to Luke, when “their eyes were opened and he vanished out of their sight.” Returning to Jerusalem, these travellers related their experience to the disciples using this revealing phrase, “He was known to us in the breaking of the bread.” That is the first biblical reference that suggests that it was within the context of reenacting the “supper of the Lord,” in which the bread was identified with the broken body of Jesus and the wine was identified with his shed blood, that their minds were opened and they saw that he revealed himself in his death as triumphant over death.

Holding that reference for a moment, we begin to look for other clues that might connect the experience of the resurrection with obeying the commandment that was supposedly given by Jesus at the last supper. “Whenever you gather together in my name, do this (break bread and share wine) in remembrance of me.”

When the resurrected Jesus first appears to the disciples in Luke, we are told that he asked for food and they gave him a piece of fish to eat. When Jesus appears to the disciples for the first time in John’s gospel, the narrative is set, “when it was evening” that is 6:00 pm, which is the time of the evening meal. When the second appearance to the disciples occurs in this last gospel, this time with Thomas present, John tells us that it was a week later (literally after eight days), but once again meant to coincide with the time of the evening meal.

When we turn to the epilogue of John (chapter 21), not believed by most scholars to be part of the original gospel, we find nonetheless a primitive Galilean story of the disciples recognizing Jesus as they ate together beside the Sea of Galilee. The familiar dialogue that Jesus has with Peter in this episode turns on the verb “to feed.” “Peter, you must feed my sheep, feed my lambs, feed my sheep.”

In the book of Revelation, the verb used by this author to describe the continuing presence of the risen Christ is the verb to eat or to dine. Jesus is represented as saying, “I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and *eat* with you and you with me.” (Rev. 3:20).

In the memory of Jesus' followers there appears to be a connection between seeing the risen Christ and sharing the common meal with its symbols of broken bread and poured out wine. That is the way they brought together their growing conviction that he was the promised messiah with the reality that he had been crucified. Ultimately they appear to have found in the image of the servant from II Isaiah (40-55) and of the shepherd king of Israel who was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver by those who bought and sold animals in the Temple (II Zechariah (9-14), scriptural references to salvation coming through pain and death. So it was, I believe, that it was the Eucharist that opened the eyes of Jesus' followers to see beyond the limits of their humanity to an image of messiah revealed through death but alive as part of who God is.

With that insight, we now return to the gospel narratives and look at every text that refers to a feeding story. They are then suddenly revealed as interpretive eucharists. In Mark there are two feedings of the multitude stories, one on the Jewish side of the lake in which 5,000 are fed with five loaves and afterwards twelve baskets of fragments are gathered up, enough to feed the twelve tribes of Israel. Then Mark moves Jesus to the Gentile side of the lake where the act is repeated but this time 4,000 are fed with seven loaves and afterwards seven baskets of fragments are gathered up, enough to feed the seven great Gentile empires under which the Jews had lived, the Romans, the Syrians, the Macedonians, the Persians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians and the Egyptians. Clearly these feeding of the multitude stories are Eucharistic accounts masquerading as miracle stories. In all of them, the gospel writers each employ the four eucharistic verbs. "He took, he blessed (or gave thanks), he broke, he gave." In the fourth gospel, the author locates all of his eucharistic thinking in the story of the feeding of the 5,000 (see John 6) and then omits any further account of the last supper, a clear sign that he saw it as symbol.

Next, we look at all the parables that focus on "banquets." Why did a banquet become the symbol of the kingdom of God breaking into human history? Why was it said that when that kingdom arrives people will come from the North, South, East and West to sit at Abraham's table? Why was Jesus called by the Fourth Gospel the "bread of life?" So, our search for the context in which resurrection was first experienced, takes us to the Eucharistic meal.

So, when resurrection dawns in human history, we conclude that Peter was in the centre of that experience. He was in Galilee. It was some time after the crucifixion, perhaps many months. Finally, the interpretive context was the reenactment of the common meal at which Peter opened the eyes of the others to understand. Now, given these clues, my task is to try to put them all together in a meaningful narrative that may come close to enabling us to enter the experience of the first Easter.

Something to consider...

- **What do you understand when it is said that Jesus is present in the breaking of bread?**
- **If Peter did open the eyes of others to the Resurrection of Jesus, what exactly would he be relating to them?**

Examining the Meaning of Resurrection

Part VI: Seeing Through a Glass Darkly

Something happened at the first Easter. Some insist that it was an event that occurred on a single day. Others suggest that an experience was identified with that day making it a symbol of a breakthrough to a new consciousness. Theologians and biblical scholars alike still debate whether it was an internal or external happening, the result of sight or insight, but something clearly happened. We can measure the results even if we cannot identify the cause. Enormous shifts in attitudes are discernible, even measurable. We learn from Mark, the earliest gospel, that when Jesus was arrested, *“all the disciples forsook him and fled”* (Mark 14:50). In view of the fact that the disciples were heroes by the time this gospel was written, the inclusion of this negative report on their behavior in a time of crisis rings as an authentic memory that simply could not be expunged from the public record. The disciples clearly deserted Jesus. The gospels even developed a biblical rationale for this desertion, something that does not happen unless the charge was real. At some point, however, something brought them back and, more than that, they were brought back with convictions that were so unshakable that the Christian movement was born. If the tradition is correct, its leaders were willing to die for the reality of their new vision. What can account for so dramatic a change?

The disciples were Jews, taught from the crib to recite the Shema: There is one God, nothing other than God can be called holy or worshiped without idolatry becoming their reality. Something in their experience with Jesus of Nazareth, however, convinced them that this Jesus was somehow related in a powerful way to what they called God. What does it take to create so vast a shift in the deepest religious convictions of these Jewish people?

Whatever the Easter moment was, it came within one generation to be identified with the first day of the week. Jewish people for whom the observance of the Sabbath was a defining characteristic, found themselves gathering on a new day for worship identified with this Jesus. The Sabbath was not abandoned so much as a new holy day was added alongside it. What does it take to create a new holy day or to relativize in that creation the most unique, defining practice of one's ancestral faith tradition? Something must account for that, but what was it?

None of this demonstrates that a literal resurrection occurred, but it does suggest that an experience, which could not be denied, called Jesus' followers into a new place, a new understanding of God, a new consciousness and a new sense of the presence of the divine. When they tried of necessity to place that experience into human words, they called it "resurrection." The Greek word, which they chose to stand for "resurrection," however, was an inadequate word, for it literally means only "to stand up" (anastasis). That was as close as human language could take them to what they were trying to describe. They looked for other words. They called it overcoming death. They symbolized what they were trying to describe by suggesting that the veil in the Temple, which separated the faithful from the Holy One, had been split from the top down. One gospel writer, Matthew, likened it to the experience of an earthquake. Paul saw it as the breaking of those barriers that inhibit our full humanity from developing. Mark said that the impact of the life was so great that even a Gentile soldier at the foot of the cross pronounced him "Son of God." Matthew tells us that all he heard the risen Christ say was: "Go into all the world." Go, beyond your fears, your insecurities and your xenophobia. Go to those you have defined as different, as subhuman, and tell them that the love of God embraces all people regardless of how diverse. Out of Jew and Gentile, male and female, bond and free, there has been created a new humanity. Luke hears this death-conquering Christ tell them they must be witnesses to his life-changing power in their homes, i.e. Jerusalem; in their immediate countryside, i.e. Judea; in the land of their deepest prejudices, i.e. Samaria, and unto the ends of the earth where a universal humanity will be known. People filled with the spirit, says Luke, will discover that there is no barrier of language or ethnicity that will divide them. John tells us that the death of this Jesus was his moment of glorification and that in the powerlessness of death in which the human drive for survival is at last escaped, God will be revealed and eternal life will be entered.

The biblical writers tried in a wide variety of ways to find adequate words to make sense of their life-changing experience. As the years went by words that the original users knew were inadequate came to be regarded as literal and objective descriptions of reality and in time these descriptions became more and more miraculous and less and less transformative or real.

When Paul wrote between the years 51-64, it is of interest to note that he left not a single narrative detail of what resurrection meant or how it

dawned. He gave us only a list of “witnesses” who were, he said, the ones who “saw,” however, he never tells us what it was that they “saw.” The earliest Gospel, Mark, written in the early seventies, relates no story of Jesus appearing to anyone. There was for them just a promise that it would be in their homes in Galilee, among the familiar things of their lives that they would “see’ him. When Matthew wrote in the mid eighties he became the first to describe Jesus appearing to the disciples after Easter, but he did so in terms of a Jesus who was transformed and newly clothed in the image of the heavenly Son of Man, borrowed from the book of Daniel, one of the most highly developed images of the Jewish messiah found in the Hebrew scriptures. Next Luke, who wrote in the late ninth decade or maybe in the early tenth decade and John, who wrote near the end of the tenth decade, both made the risen Jesus quite physical, making it hard not to think of what happened to him as a bodily resuscitation. Here was, they said, a physically deceased body reversing the death process, restoring destroyed cells to life and destroyed brains to thinking. These last two gospels make the resurrected Jesus eat to make obvious a functioning gastrointestinal system, to speak to make obvious a functioning larynx and vocal chords, to walk, to make obvious a functioning skeletal system, and to interpret scripture, to make obvious a functioning brain. Yet as crude as these literalizations are, both writers also attached to these descriptions of the raised Jesus the power to materialize out of thin air and to dematerialize into thin air, to walk into a room where the doors are barred, to breathe on the disciples in an act that imparted the Holy Spirit and even to ascend into the sky of a three-tiered universe in order to return to where God was thought to be. Such language is literal nonsense, but it pointed to a real experience that words could never embrace.

In this series exploring the resurrection, I have tried to isolate the evidence that points to the reality of the experience. The meaning of Easter dawned in Peter, who then opened the eyes of others so that they too might see what he had seen. It happened in Galilee in places that were part of the memory of Jesus. The dawning of this reality did not occur all at once, but rather it grew slowly over a period of time, perhaps as long as a year. It was more like the birth of a new consciousness than it was a sighting or a vision. It is noteworthy that in the gospel narratives no one sees the risen Christ except believers. Surely there was an internal, subjective quality to Easter that must have been more real than any possible external, objective

quality. Does this mean that Easter was not real, but merely a figment of someone's imagination? I do not think so for reality is so much more to me than objective data.

The impact of Jesus' life on his followers was so intense it simply did not fade after his death. They kept awaking to new dimensions of what he meant. No act of human cruelty could destroy his life, no barriers could withstand his love. Jesus embraced the outcasts, whether lepers, Samaritans, Gentiles or the woman caught in adultery. His life could not be contained within the boundaries of religion. He allowed the touch of the woman with the chronic menstrual flow; he proclaimed that all religious rules had no value unless they enhanced human life. His followers found in him a life that reflected the Source of Life, a love that reflected the Source of Love and the being that reflected the Ground of Being and so they said "all that we mean by the word 'God' we have experienced in him."

His call was to enter a new consciousness, to become free of the boundaries inside which we feel we must live if we want to be secure; to recognize that beyond self-consciousness, there is a universal consciousness that we can enter and experience what Paul called "The glorious liberty of the children of God." There we escape the uniquely human struggle to *become* and simply begin to *be*. That was resurrection. That was Easter and it was Jesus who opened this new dimension of life to them. In the power of his example, undiminished by his death, they entered that vision and experienced resurrection. In that moment, they began to see that God lived in them and that they lived in God and nothing was ever the same thereafter. None of this happened on the third day. That time measure is not to be literalized. The dawning of a new insight never occurs quickly. Jesus was the door, the way into life, they said, and they followed him into an unending new consciousness. Of course it was real. Of course it cannot be reduced to words. Of course in time the inadequate words they employed were literalized in an attempt to preserve them forever. Literalizing truth, however, always destroys truth, compromises truth and even falsifies truth. "Behold I show you a mystery," Paul exclaimed. I wonder why we cannot allow the mystery to remain a mystery. "We see through a glass darkly," Paul also said, but we do see and what we see is that when we have the courage to walk beyond the limits of life, we walk simultaneously into the mystery of God. That is where Easter begins.

Something to consider...

- **Jack Spong considers the Resurrection to be 'a new understanding of God, a new consciousness and a new sense of the presence of the divine'. Is this an adequate conclusion to reach having read the biblical accounts?**

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