

## Falling into Place: the Resurrection Puzzle

Ancient peoples, in burying their dead, often placed articles the deceased might need in their journey through the afterlife: spears, arrows, some food, extra clothing . . . Surprisingly, the custom has made a bit of a reappearance in modern West. It's common to see photographs, jewelry, teddy bears placed in coffins. Nigel Barley in his book Grave Matters relates stories told by crematorium officials of widows placing in the coffin a packet of digestive biscuits, or the deceased's spare glasses and false teeth. On one occasion a widow put into her husband's coffin two cans of spray adhesive that the dead man had used to paste on his toupe, causing an explosion that bend the furnace doors. This is not a plausible explanation for how the stone was moved on Easter morning. But it does raise the question of what sort of beliefs, if any does give rise to this kind of behaviour?

It's assumed that we Christians believe in "life after death," but in the modern West, the idea of that including *transformation of the physical body* simply never occurs to most modern Western people. Most people have little or no idea what the word *resurrection* means or why Christians believe in it. ( See NT Wright Surprised by Hope)

Perhaps the confusion begins with the New Testament itself where the resurrections accounts are, admittedly. . . .

### Puzzling

There are so many odd things about the Easter story. But as we read the accounts in all four Gospels, the pieces of this strange puzzle begin to fall into place. Pure logic begins to drives us ever closer to one undeniable conclusion: the original Christian who recorded the events truly believed that he rose bodily from the tomb and that his disciples had had genuine personal encounters with him.

What *you and I* and other modern Western people do with the pieces of this strange ancient puzzle is quite another matter, but let's dismiss right away any foolishness that these accounts were originally *meant* to be *fictional*, and that they were created by their authors simply to be *inspirational* stories not to be taken *literally*. No. The jigsaw pieces that form our Easter story have all the hallmarks of eye-witness accounts. They're chaotic, unrefined, and at points even contradictory. But this is what gives the Easter story its perpetual ring of truth.

So to acknowledge this puzzling nature, we must remember where we are: We are standing in an empty tomb. The floor is *cold stone* beneath our feet. Linen lies strewn all about and *he is not here*. What has *happened*? Well, that is something for which *none of us* has any scientific proof one way or another. Historians, ancient and modern alike, have put forth various hypotheses about this empty tomb, none of which can ever be conclusive. So, we, too, are left as puzzled today as those who first happened on the scene.

Mark's gospel, considered the oldest, originally ended at verse 8 with the disciples before an empty tomb, not yet recording any appearance of Jesus anywhere to anyone. But telling simply this: "*they trembled and were beside themselves.*"

On the first Easter morning, out there somewhere, was a dangerous and unbound Jesus Christ, and what these people would need to solve this puzzle was not more forensic evidence but . . .

### Faith

But neither the miracle of the resurrection nor the incomprehensible discovery of an empty tomb could produce faith in these disciples. They are trembling and beside themselves. Their relationship with Jesus had reach a sudden dead end. But faith would created in them as the risen Jesus *encounters* them. And even though at that moment they trembled, the faith-creating encounter had already begun. *Before* they actually *saw* Jesus, touched him, heard him speak, faith was already being created by words of the angels: "Don't be alarmed, you're looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, '*He is going ahead of you* into Galilee. . .

Faith is not a work of the human flesh. It is not something we must *do* or *have* before God will have anything to do with us. No. Faith is something God is already creating in us before we even know it. *He goes ahead* of us. Makes us ready. Prepares the way. And by faith we can know the presence of the risen Christ in the present time. But the resurrection of Jesus in the historical past confronts us with certain beliefs about God and our world and how we should live in the present world, beliefs and behaviours often at odds with those of people who have yet to come in their journey to faith in Christ. But nevertheless, there is hope in this story because the inability of the modern mind to understand the resurrection is still met with the same promise: Jesus is still "going ahead" into new Galilees, still setting up the circumstances in which men and women will encounter him and accomplishing in each heart that which the heart cannot do on it's own power.

So back on that cold stone floor of the tomb, despite their every failure to believe what he told them *before* the cross, he will call them *again* be his disciples *again* and will encounter them *again* in a brand new way that would enable them to *see him* again in Galilee.

And here today, the Spirit of God is still creating that same faith in us as we encounter this puzzling story. In John's Gospel, the first clue need in solving the puzzle is found when they realize . . .

### **Something has moved**

"The *stone* had been removed from the entrance." How profoundly troubling! You know, it took an incredible act of courage to bury Jesus. Usually condemned criminals went *unburied*, relatives too afraid to claim the body, it would have been thrown on a heap somewhere where the vultures and scavenging dogs would have consumed the flesh and by morning of the third day nothing much would have been left. A grizzly skull, maybe a rib. . . .

But *Jesus* body had been *claimed* and carefully buried according to traditional Jewish practice: embalmed with spices, wrapped in linen, seal in a tomb by huge stone. In human culture, there is almost a universal respect for a dead body. But this was especially true with the Jews due to their unique belief that one day the dead would rise from the grave. Jesus' predictions regarding his resurrection after three days were all understood to refer to the this Jewish belief in the resurrection when the kingdom of God came in glory at the last day. Remember Martha's response to Jesus when he promised "your brother will rise"? Yes, Lord," she said, " I know he will rise in *the resurrection at the last day*" (Jn11:24). But now the stone was moved and almost anything could have happened to the body of Jesus, but no one would have envisaged for a moment that there could have been a personal, one-off resurrection of one man, apart from the grand resurrection of the kingdom of God in the last days. Therefore. . .

### **Robbery was assumed**

Mary Magdalene is simply panic-stricken. Her only logical assumption is foul play. Someone has stolen his body. . . This theory was later used to attack the beliefs of early church. The Jews spread the rumour that Jesus' disciples *themselves* removed his body. Most modern people hearing the Easter story, simply *assume* either this or some other logical explanation must exist for the missing corpse.

But first impressions are often be misleading, just like that jigsaw piece you *think* goes here, until you find another piece that doesn't seem to fit anywhere, and you're stumped for hours until realize it is an imperfect fit. "O, that one doesn't go there, it must go here, and then this one fits perfectly here!" (Anyone who does jigsaws knows you can be misled by this for a *long* time) But a more careful reading of the story only leads to . . .

### **An even deeper mystery**

When Peter went into the tomb, he saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. And the cloth *was folded up by itself*, separate from the linen."

Now, here's a curious thing: no robber would have unwrapped a body. Nor would they have left the costly cloth and spices behind. Why would anyone go to the trouble of unwrapping a corpse with oozing wounds before making off with it? And why would they pause, to neatly fold up a piece of cloth? That would be ridiculous. This wasn't a grave robbery. But Peter's *stumped*.

And so many an honest person spends a few hours carefully reading the resurrection account: an armed guard, a sealed tomb. A traumatized band of disciples in grip of sheer terror they might next to be crucified. Jesus of Nazareth, certified dead by professional soldiers who, if they know anything at all, know how to make sure people are good and dead.

Anyone who reads this story -- even if they aren't ready to believe Jesus rose from the dead must agree there is definitely something here that just doesn't add up. He's dead, he's buried, *he has even been embalmed* with the standard seventy pounds of spices and wrapped in long strips of cloth like an Egyptian mummy. He's not just unconscious, and no one would have unwrapped his body before stealing it, so what *are we to make of this empty tomb?* There comes a point where the only thing left to believe is . . .

### **Some kind of miracle**

"Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed."

Curiously, this disciple's name is never given. He is simply, "the other disciple, the one Jesus loved" (3) "the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first" But most interpreters point in the direction that this unnamed disciple is in fact John, the same disciple who wrote this Gospel. So why doesn't he tell us his name? Why doesn't he just say, "I went into the tomb and I believed"?

My theory is that the apostle John was a very humble and self-effacing man. But this allowed him to unleash an extremely powerful literary device here: In not naming himself as the other disciple, he is in effect saying, "Put yourself in my shoes: I was the first person to reach the empty tomb of Jesus. And when I saw that tomb, I *believed*".

But believed *what*, John? How, did you *interpret* this empty tomb? *What* did you think had HAPPENED there? Did you remember that you'd seen Jesus raise Lazarus who had been dead four days? Did you think about all the other miracles and instantly conclude that Jesus had

risen?

*I wonder what it was like to be the first person in the whole world upon whom the weight of meaning of this empty tomb falls in?*

But that miraculous moment of first belief is only the beginning of the process of . . .

### **The Messiah's redemptive work in an individual's life.**

"Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying."

There's been a lot of mythology that's grown up around Mary Magdalene. The Bible says she was one "from whom seven demons had gone out." (Luke 8-2), a vastly misunderstood statement by modern readers, the word "*seven*" was probably more important to ancient readers than the word "*demons*". Seven was the number of perfection, indicating that Mary was probably recognized as an especially saintly person in the movement. She was one in who God had done an extremely deep, *sevenfold* healing work.

But as she wept before the cross, she is also a woman in whose life there are still some missing pieces. And now as she bends over to look into the tomb, it seems that the pieces of her life's puzzle that are now in place are all about to be scattered once more.

But all we know the outcome. We had all have read in John's gospel of her encounter with the risen Jesus who calls her name. And this has significance for us all. For now the missing piece of her life's puzzle has astoundingly fallen into place. God's redemptive work in her was finished at Calvary. And the same is true for you and me.

Paul says in Galatians 2:20 "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave his life for me." It was Jesus' faithful death on the cross and God's vindication of that is proven in the resurrection.

For Mary, for you, for me, we can have a relationship with God through Jesus. He will truly encounter us and we can call him "*Teacher*." But if we do . . .

### **Life will be different from now on**

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "

Isn't it curious that Mary is given the message for the disciples, not that he is risen from the dead, but rather that he is about to ascend to his Father. Why is that? Well, we know the first thing Mary did was tell them, "I've seen the Lord!" But forty days later, his Easter appearances would end and the Book of Acts will begin with Jesus ascending into heaven. From this point on, things on earth are going to be different. Because in ascending to his Father, Jesus is empowering these people for his mission on earth, to proclaim the forgiveness of sin in Jesus name. He tells them that by the power of his the Holy Spirit, whatever sin *they* forgive is forgiven! And there is no evidence that this power of forgive sin is confined to only special officers in the church – quite the contrary – Jesus taught every believer to pray "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Let me tell you, if there is anything in this puzzling Easter story that should make sense to you today it is this: Whatever guilt you bear. Whatever sin you have, whatever bondage you may be under, whatever addictions enslave you, *it can be different from now on*. In Jesus' name, you can leave here forgiven. Because the pieces of the resurrection puzzle have now all fallen into place.