

What really Happened at Easter?

Eric Whittaker investigates the earliest Easter Story.

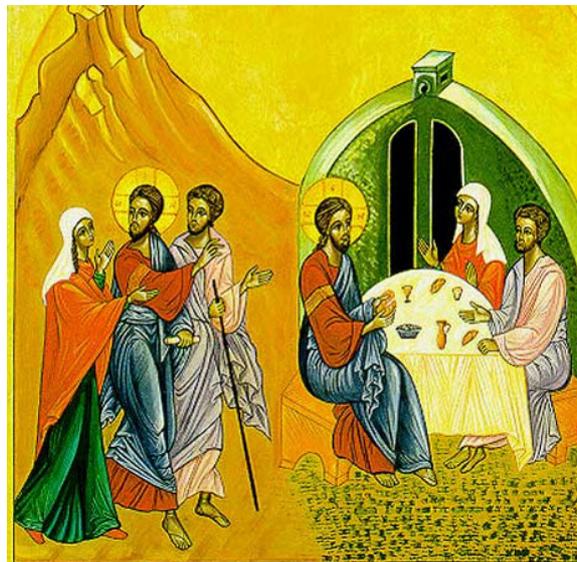
We had had a very upsetting two days. We had gone in to Jerusalem for Passover and stayed over Sabbath, and now Mary¹ and I were walking the eight miles home to Emmaus, but on the Friday the most frightful thing had happened; Jesus, our friend and teacher, had been crucified. As we walked along we discussed not only that gruesome event but all the amazing teachings that he had given us over the last few years, and which had led us to believe that he was the Messiah, the anointed leader that our nation had for so long expected. Many of the things that he had said had seemed very strange, and had not seemed to make sense at the time, but he had spoken with such authority that we did not like to say too often that we could not understand. We recalled how he had repeatedly told us that he would be crucified, and that when he was lifted up on the cross that would be a glorification, not a degradation, and he would draw all men to him. And then it was as though he was with us as we walked along and he was reviving our memories of what he had said in the past. There were so many things that he had quoted from the scriptures; that the Messiah must be expected to suffer, and that the true expectation of a Messiah was not a military leader but a suffering servant. And then when we reached home and got a meal, as we were breaking the bread and pouring out the wine, it was just as though we were back with him three days before when he said 'this is my body broken for you, and this is my blood poured out for you'.

We just had to set off back to Jerusalem to share with our friends this amazing insight that we had had. When we got back there we found that we were not the only ones who had seen the light.

Everyone else had been going over things in the same way, in little groups; John had taken Jesus' mother home and they had been going over it all with James his own brother and James, the Lord's brother. Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary (who remembered more sayings than anyone) had done the same. Mary Magdalene had had a vision of angels in the tomb, and then a vision of her Rabboni in the garden. And when we all got together we all had a vision of Jesus himself. It was a thing that was very dependent on shared experience; Thomas who had gone off on his own did not see the light for another week, until he had rejoined us. We were an incredibly close-knit group. We even shared all our possessions with one another until our success in drawing in new believers made this too difficult to organise. Jesus had truly risen from the dead and we were his risen body.

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The story of the walk to Emmaus often seems, from the place it is given in the lectionary, to be a nice little addendum to the Easter story, but in fact it seems like the earliest record we have and is therefore the best place to start in understanding it. In general the gospel stories were written 40 or 50 years later, and presumably the Emmaus story was incorporated by Luke in his gospel at that later time, but its internal evidence suggests that it must have been a little bit of contemporary oral history that Luke alone happened to get hold of. It mentions but does not depend on the idea of the empty tomb – in fact it tends to dismiss the idea. The details of what Cleopas and Mary found when they got back to Jerusalem are of course imaginary, but are a reasonable extrapolation of what we know. It seems unreasonable to suppose (as is usually done) that the disciples were



Breaking bread at Emmaus

oblivious of what they had been taught until they were told it again after the resurrection.

The only further evidence of what was believed about the resurrection in the decades before the writing of the Gospels is to be found in Paul's letters. He expounds at length on the fact of the resurrection, but he never mentions the empty tomb. He introduces the idea of the church, and of the church as the body of Christ, so it is a reasonable conclusion that for Paul the risen body of Christ was the church, not an incomprehensible quasi-material body that had come out of the tomb. Further evidence is to be found in Paul's argument with the Athenians on the Areopagus, where again he does not mention the empty tomb, although that would have been a knock-down argument in the circumstances. Of course we do not have a contemporary report of this argument, but this does not matter because we are merely concerned with the fact of the empty tomb not being mentioned.

Later Dogmatic Ideas of the Easter Story

To take the discussion further we need to set out in detail the orthodox resurrection story as it was in the latter part of the first century, and as indeed it is today. On the Sunday morning the body of Jesus was not in the tomb. Later that day, and subsequently, various disciples had encounters with an embodied Jesus who was able to appear within a locked room, to disappear at will, to eat, and to breathe on them, and possibly to be touched. The latter point is somewhat obscure, because Thomas was invited to touch him but did not do so, and Mary Magdalene was forbidden to do so. It is claimed that these facts prove that the encounters were not visions² but that the body of Jesus was in an incomprehensible state. It was at times part of the physical world and at other times not. This situation continued for forty days, at the end of which time the body disappeared permanently from the physical world and was not seen again.

It seems evident that this orthodox version of the story cannot have been current in the first few years after the crucifixion, or Peter would have imparted it to Saul at their meeting when Saul went to Jerusalem for consultations after his meeting with Jesus on the Damascus road. That meeting on the Damascus road was obviously a vision, and was in any case long after the forty day period, but Saul (Paul) always believed that it was

on a par with the appearances to the other apostles, and no-one disputed this.

What we really need is a contemporary account of Peter's sermons in the very early days, but of course we only have the accounts in Acts written decades later when the dogmatic version was already current. They do not specifically refer to the empty tomb, but they set forth very definitely the idea that the body of Jesus disappeared from the physical world so that his flesh would not see corruption, because it would be inappropriate for the body of Messiah to rot away. It seems very likely that it was this idea that led to the development of the orthodox version of the resurrection story. But it is a very Old Testament point of view. From that point of view it was equally inappropriate that Messiah should be hanged on a tree.

Paul never mentions the empty tomb.

Both these ideas of impropriety are incompatible with the Christian concept of the incarnation. The Son of God became man in order to share with the sons of men all the worst things that could happen to them, to die in agony and to rot in the grave.

Conclusion

The conclusion is that the orthodox story is not just something that one doubts because it is difficult to understand. One rejects it because it is incompatible with one's belief in the incarnation. So back to Emmaus and to Paul.

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1. Luke only says that one of them was called Cleopas and does not say who the other was. But John says that Mary the wife of Cleopas was standing by the cross, and it is evident from Luke's story that they were going to their home together at Emmaus.
 2. This argument is of course invalid. There is no limitation on what can be done by the object of a vision, and perceptions of it can be tactile as well as visual.
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