

THE RESURRECTION NARRATIVE

Luke 24:1-53

Jesus is alive

Jesus' death marked for him, as it does for us all, the end of the only kind of existence of which we human beings have direct sensory experience. From the beginning of recorded time, however, we find an expectation that death marks a horizon but not an end of our existence. This has been envisaged in different ways, and there was a difference of opinion among Jesus' contemporaries concerning the resurrection (see the commentary on 20:27-40).

Jesus himself believed that we would experience life, that is to say communion with God, beyond the grave. His belief was based on a conviction which he had about God who, having given life, would not withdraw the gift (20:38). The fierce opposition which Jesus encountered led him to warn his followers of the death that was surely awaiting him in Jerusalem. However, he did not fail to share with them also his trust that God would raise him to life 'on the third day' (see the commentary on 9:32). That Jesus was, indeed, raised to life by God is at the very centre of Christian belief. This is clear from the whole of the New Testament (see Paul's lengthy treatment of the subject in 1 Corinthians 15). The whole of Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles, witnesses to this belief in the early Christian community.

In the concluding chapter of his gospel, in a series of brilliant portraits, Luke invites his readers to open their minds and hearts to the wonder of this truth, while showing them how they might experience for themselves the reality of Jesus' presence and action in their midst.

As we indicated in the opening chapter of this book, the gospels are meant to be contemplated as one contemplates an icon. This is absolutely imperative for this final chapter. Jesus is dead. He is, therefore, beyond the grasp of the senses. His first disciples could not and did not see or hear or touch him in the same way as they had prior to his crucifixion. Yet we have their word for it that they experienced his presence among them and we know that this experience affected them profoundly. We know also that many people found their testimony thoroughly convincing. The stunning growth of the Church is evidence of this. However, as the following scenes will demonstrate, theirs was a conviction of faith not of sight. Believing, as we find it at the heart of Christian experience, is a way of seeing which is enjoyed only by a heart enlightened by grace.

It is true that the heart, like the eye, can be deceived. The faith, however, of which Luke is speaking, had to stand the acid tests of ordinary life. It was a faith that refused to shy away from the real. It was a faith that bore fruit in love. It was a faith that commanded the respect of anyone willing to witness it with an open mind. It stood up to the most rigorous human testing, and its fruit was human beings of a maturity that was stunning by any standard that people might reasonably have set. It has continued to be such down through the centuries.

The word 'see' and its passive form 'was seen' (or 'appeared') keep recurring in the following scenes. We should be careful not to automatically assume that it is being used in its sensory meaning. We are accustomed to use 'see' for insight of the understanding, and Luke has already used it for this earlier in the gospel (12:15; 13:35). He also uses it for when people 'see' an angel (Zachary:1:12, 22; Jesus: 22:43; the women: 24:23), when Moses and Elijah are 'seen' on the mountain (9:31), and when Jesus is 'seen' in glory (9:32). He uses it of Simeon 'seeing' death (2:26).

We find the same verb used in the promise of Isaiah that 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God' (3:6), and in the statements by Jesus that some of his contemporaries would 'see' the kingdom of God (9:27), and would long to 'see' one of the days of the Son of Man (17:22; 21:27). Our English 'aware' comes from the same root as the Greek *horaô* and captures its meaning well. In the following scenes Luke is illustrating ways in which we can become aware of Jesus' presence among us. As will be made clear, the 'seeing' is such as to be possible only to a person who has faith.

It is obvious to us today – and it was no less true for Jesus' first followers – that Jesus' presence among them was, like the presence of God, one that is mysterious, and perceived only by faith. If we experience his presence, it will only be, as Luke will soon make clear, as we journey on our way remembering him and with hearts open to the enlightenment that comes from God's Spirit. It will especially happen as we gather with our fellow believers and celebrate his life and death. In the following portraits, Luke wants to show us that the risen Jesus is encountered precisely where we need him and in ways which we least expect. The encounter is always a surprise, as filled with dread as it is with joy. It is not an experience to which we can cling. Our faith renewed, we are encouraged to walk, as Jesus himself walked, in the night. Our faith, as Saint Peter tells us, is: 'a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts' (2Peter 1:19).

Luke's account begins with those who love Jesus seeking him in the expected but wrong place. In spite of their keen desire they fail to 'see' him. His account ends with Jesus' disciples instructed to pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the experience of whose presence is the blessing which Jesus has bestowed upon mankind. It is in experiencing the Spirit of love shared by Jesus and his Father that we experience Jesus himself who is living in communion with this Father. The two intermediate scenes show us, personally and as a community, how we can share the experience and faith of Jesus' first disciples.

What makes their experience special and our faith 'apostolic' is that it was the apostles who knew Jesus before his death. They could recognise the continuity of their experience of God in Jesus during the time when they knew him prior to his death, and their religious experience afterwards. We who live in a different period cannot share their pre-crucifixion experience, but our post-crucifixion experience is the same. We have their word for it that the one who touches our lives, making our hearts burn within us and sustaining us in our journey of faith, is indeed Jesus of Nazareth living in communion with his Father, and inviting us to that same transforming union.

¹ But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.' ⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

compare Matthew 28:1-8
Mark 16:1-8

The women and the empty tomb

The women leave for the tomb as early as possible, just before first light, intending to anoint Jesus with the spices they had prepared (see 23:56). They find the stone rolled away and they do not find the body of Jesus. Instead 'two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them'. Is this meant to recall the scene of the transfiguration (9:29-31)? Jesus has made his departure (his exodus) from this world and has accomplished in Jerusalem the mission he received from God: a mission of redemption promised by the Law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah).

The response of the women is the response of people overwhelmed by the presence of the divine. Faced with the empty tomb they are told to reflect over Jesus' words, and to realise that they are mistaken in 'looking for the living among the dead'. Jesus is not in the tomb, because he has risen, as he himself had foretold (see 9:22; 13:32-33; 18:31-33). The women see for themselves that 'he is not here'.

Death for Jesus was no different from death for any of us. It meant the end of the kind of presence that his disciples knew. No longer could they see him or touch him or be touched by him. The 'he is not here' raises the question: Where is he? And our faith answers: he is at the heart of the mystery of life. As Jesus himself said: 'God is God not of the dead, but of the living' (20:38).

Wherever God is Jesus is, and since God is everywhere Jesus is still present among us though mysteriously beyond our empirical experience. Hence the call to remain 'alert' (12:37), and to 'stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near' (21:28). Does this explain the irony of the response of the women in this scene? Instead of raising their heads, they 'bowed their faces to the ground'. They are not expecting redemption.

The women could not see for themselves that 'he has risen'. This is something which they were invited to believe. Jesus himself had told them it would be so, and they could find indications of it in the sacred writings of their tradition.

To point to something that is beyond our everyday experience we must use imagery and analogy. The first time Luke used the word 'raise' (Greek *egeirō*) was in the hymn of Zechariah: 'He has raised up a mighty saviour for us' (1:69). It is a simple everyday word used, for example when Jesus tells the paralysed man: '*Stand up and walk*' (5:23; compare 6:8; 11:8; 13:25).

However, it is also used of raising from death (20:37) as, for example, when Jesus addresses the dead son of the widow of Nain (7:14), or the daughter of Jairus (8:54). One of the signs of Jesus' Messianic work is that 'the dead are raised' (7:22). Some were saying that Jesus himself was John the Baptist who had been 'raised from the dead' (9:7), and Jesus himself expressed his trust in God that he would be 'raised' (9:22).

Because of certain ways in which they experienced the risen Jesus, Jesus' disciples came to believe that Jesus, who was crucified, was in truth alive and active among them after his death. God had raised him from death into the life-beyond-death. It was the wonder of this that brought them through their fright and the shattering of their hopes to the new energy that empowered them to do to others what Jesus had done to them. It was this spirit that brought about the incredible growth of the Christian community.

It is this foundational belief that is presented by Luke as the explanation for the absence of Jesus' dead body. The resurrected life is not simply a new beginning. All that Jesus was is caught up in the transforming mystery of grace. The empty tomb and the dramatic language before us in this ritual text depict for us the wonderful truth that death is robbed of its prey, that the whole of our human person will be transformed and that the final victory is not with darkness but with light. This is the fulfilment of Jesus' trust that God would act decisively ('on the third day', 9:22; 13:32; 18:33), and that he would, indeed, rise again. This is also the fulfilment of the promise Jesus made that the Son of Man would be glorified (9:26; 21:27). On the cross Jesus radiantly revealed the beauty of God as a God of unconditional love. The empty tomb is a sign, for those with faith to see, that Jesus' trust in his father was not misplaced.

The experience of an empty tomb already contains, for those with faith, a promise and a hope. Luke's church experienced Jesus, as do we all, as the one who 'is not here'. They had to wait on God. But they had reason to wait, for Jesus was 'living' (see also 24:13; and Acts 1:3; 25:19); he was 'risen'. God was faithful to Jesus, and God will be faithful to those who lose their lives because of him (9:24).

The women, the first missionaries of the resurrection, tell 'the eleven and all the rest', the 'apostles', but no one believes them. Luke does not present the empty tomb as a proof of the resurrection: the women are simply 'perplexed', and the others do not believe. The empty tomb does, however, raise a question. It is a reminder of what Jesus himself hoped for, and it prepared the women, and it can prepare us, to be vigilant, so that when the risen Jesus comes to us we will be open to his presence and his call. If we are vigilant, we will see him when he comes.

**¹² But Peter got up
and ran to the tomb;
stooping and looking
in, he saw the linen
cloths by themselves;
then he went home,
amazed at what had
happened.**

Peter and the empty tomb

The empty tomb belongs within the horizon of our sensory experience. The most it can do is cause amazement and raise a question. It cannot substitute for experiencing Jesus himself and was not the reason for Peter's faith in the resurrection.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus

Distilled into this finely sculptured narrative is an experience that was typical of those who made up the early Christian communities.

Notice firstly that the disciples are not alone. They are journeying together. Notice secondly that they are discussing Jesus. They do not realise it at first, but Jesus has already taken the initiative and has come near to them, walking with them as they journey.

At his instigation they give expression to their sadness, remembering what Jesus had said and done, the hopes which they had placed in him and how all this had seemed to come to nothing when he was crucified.

They remain disillusioned as they walk away from Jerusalem, away from the community and away from their hopes. All that is left for them is to let go their dream and to take up again the life which they had left when they decided to put their trust in Jesus.

Memory is important, but it is clear that memory is not enough. Something is needed if the eyes of their hearts and minds are not to remain closed. How are they going to see that the one in whom they have placed their hopes is already walking with them, though they know it not?

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,

¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷ And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad.

¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' ¹⁹ He asked them, 'What things?'

They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,

²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

21 But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.

22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.

24 Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.'

25 Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'

27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

They even realise that it is 'the third day' since Jesus' death – an indication that they recall Jesus' promise concerning his resurrection (9:22; 18:33). They know, too, that some women have reported finding Jesus' tomb empty and are claiming to have received a vision from God telling them that Jesus was alive. This had been partly confirmed by some of their own companions who, though they had not actually seen Jesus, had found the tomb just as the women had said. None of this is enough to open their eyes. The only one who can do that is Jesus himself, the one who has come near them in their sadness and is walking with them.

He does so in two ways. They have to learn to ponder God's word, as Mary pondered it 'in her heart' (2:19). He inspires them to go back to the Scriptures, to 'Moses and all the prophets' and to read them again in the light of their experience of him. As they do so, he enlightens them concerning the mysterious logic of divine mercy: 'Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'

As we have seen, Luke throughout his Gospel has identified the Messiah with the Son of Man and the Suffering Servant (see also the extended treatment on suffering in the commentary on 9:43-45). Note that it was when they came to grasp the place of suffering in Jesus' life that they experienced the fire of Jesus' Spirit purifying and enlightening their hearts: 'were not our hearts were burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us'.

This is the baptism 'with the Holy Spirit and with fire' of which John the Baptist spoke (3:16). This is the fire that Jesus longed to kindle upon the earth (12:49). The word is purifying their hearts, and will continue to do so till all that is not fire is consumed. Their hearts are being prepared to recognise him.

They must come to know that Jesus gives meaning to our suffering lives, and that his words and deeds come from a mind and heart that know the depths of human pain and abandonment and the agony that can do nothing but cry out to God in distress. Only such a redeemer could attract us to believe.

The recognition comes only 'in the breaking of the bread'. This is no ordinary meal, but the meal of the Christian assembly (Acts 2:42). It is a meal to which they invite Jesus: 'stay with us' – 'come, Lord Jesus' (Revelation 22:20). The simple ritual makes present Jesus final supper with them (see 22:19). At that supper, Jesus gave his meaning to the death that he was to suffer: he offered his broken body and his lifeblood to them in an act of redeeming love. At the same time, he asked of them: 'Do this in remembrance of me' (22:19).

In the Breaking of Bread, Jesus' disciples did remember him and they renewed their promise to do what Jesus had done: to offer their bodies too and to pour out their lives, as he had done, in love for the world. Just as he was 'with them' as they walked along, so he is 'with them' as they celebrate the Eucharist.

It was when these two disciples pleaded with Jesus to stay with them and committed themselves to share the Paschal mystery with him that 'their eyes were opened and they recognised him'. Luke is careful to say that they 'recognised him'. They did not see him with the eyes of the body ('he vanished from their sight') but with the eyes of faith.

Jesus' presence to them draws them back to Jerusalem – every disciple must journey there, following the Master. Their experience of the risen Jesus was personal but it was not meant for them alone. They must take it back into the believing community. In Jerusalem they find 'the eleven and their companions gathered together'. Their experience is confirmed: 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon' (see 1 Corinthians 15:4-5). Already Simon is strengthening his brothers (22:32).

The two disciples were not the only ones to lose hope at the time of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Luke presents their story because it illustrates the experience of many of Jesus' early followers, and because it expresses the way in which Luke's readers too will experience in their lives the presence of the crucified and risen Jesus.

28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. 29 But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them.

30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

31 Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight. 32 They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'

33 That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

34 They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!'

35 Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'

³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

³⁸ He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?'

³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.'

⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?'

⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.

Jesus is present in the assembled Eucharistic community

This scene follows immediately on the previous one. It is the evening of the 'first day of the week' (compare 24:1, 13, 29, 33, 36), the evening of the first day of the new creation, the day on which Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

Luke has structured this Jerusalem passage in parallel with the Emmaus one. There Jesus joins the disciples as they are engaged in conversation. So it is here, except that now we are witnessing the assembly of the community with 'the eleven and their companions gathered together' (24:33).

Here the risen Jesus offers the gift of 'peace'. This is the Messianic peace for which Zechariah longed (1:79), the peace promised by the angelic host at Jesus' birth (2:14). The beginnings of this peace came with Jesus' healing during his public ministry (7:50; 8:48). His apostles were commissioned to offer it to those to whom they brought the good news of the kingdom (10:5-6). Now at last, with the resurrection of Jesus, the new creation has begun and God can pour it out upon the world.

Luke introduced the idea of a 'ghost' to make the point to his Greek readers that it is really Jesus of Nazareth whom the disciples are experiencing, and that it is the whole of his transformed human reality that now lives in glory and is present in their midst, and not a disembodied soul.

As in the Emmaus scene, so here, the disciples can recognise the risen Jesus only to the extent that they grasp the place of suffering in God's design. They do this by reflecting on their sacred writings in the light of their experience of Jesus' death. They do it by looking upon his pierced hands and feet.

Both the Emmaus and the Jerusalem scenes are Eucharistic. The disciples fail to recognise Jesus till he eats with them. The assembled community experiences the presence of its risen Lord as it gathers to celebrate this sacred meal in his name. Luke states this again in the second volume of his work:

God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

– Acts 10:40-41

This is their friend Jesus. He used to recline with them and share with them a simple meal from the lake. He continues to share such intimacies with them. We would be misinterpreting this scene were we to use it to draw conclusions concerning the nature of the risen body. Paul deals with this question in writing to the Christians of Corinth:

Someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come? 'Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be ... God gives a body as he has chosen ... Not all flesh is alike ... It is sown a soul-body (*sôma psychikon*), it is raised a spiritual body (*sôma pneumatikon*) ... The first man, Adam, became a living soul, the last Adam a life-giving spirit.

– 1 Corinthians 15:35-45

Luke is expressing the faith of his community that Jesus, after his death, has been given by God the full expression of what we are all created to be. His 'body', or as we would say his 'person', is now wholly expressive of the Spirit, that is to say of his communion with God his Father. He is now free of the restrictions of space and time and the other limitations that belong to the human condition as we now experience it. Now he can offer the Spirit without reserve.

44 Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.'

45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

46 and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

48 You are witnesses of these things.

49 And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Jesus' final words focus on the central truth that has been the driving force behind the development of Luke's gospel narrative. The terrible enigma of the cross provides the key to unlocking the profound meaning of 'the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms'. In the light of Jesus' life-giving, love-giving and self-giving on the cross, we should be able to see that it was essential to God's providential design (see 4:21; Acts 1:16, 3:18, 13:27) that the Messiah should 'suffer and rise from the dead on the third day' (see also 9:22).

The risen Jesus, in the midst of his disciples, shares with them his own understanding of the Scriptures. If we listen to him, we will learn to hear God's word as a 'son'.

It is Jesus' faith, hope and love throughout his experience of rejection that, in the providential design of the merciful God, transcends cultural differences and touches us all in our humanity, bringing 'forgiveness of sins to all nations'. John the Baptist proclaimed this (3:3-6). He also proclaimed that, for this forgiveness to be effective, 'repentance' (3:3) was required. Luke reminds us of this in this present passage (see also Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38-41). Jesus, by his example and by the gift of his Spirit, makes it possible for us to free ourselves from all that distracts us, from all that drags us down, from all that possesses and neutralises our spirit, from all that blocks our yearning and blunts our desire.

Within the often inescapable limits to our freedom we must be ready to sit with Mary at the Lord's feet to hear and heed his word (10:39). We must be willing to accept his invitation to eat and drink with him and with those who are committed to being his disciples. Without such a response, God's love-words will be like the seed that fell on rock, or among thorns. 'Choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life' (8:14), we will find ourselves resisting or ignoring grace and we will fail to experience the forgiveness, peace and communion that is offered us by the risen Christ.

Jesus willed to entrust to his disciples the mission of proclaiming the good news to all nations (see Acts 13:47). To empower them to carry out this mission, he will send upon them the Spirit promised by his Father (see Acts 1:4). This is the Spirit that came down upon his mother at the time of his conception (1:35). This is the Spirit that descended upon him at his baptism (3:22), and that inspired, directed and sustained him throughout his public ministry.

The blessing of the risen Lord

Luke concludes his gospel where he began it: in the temple (see 1:9). What was announced to Zechariah has now been fulfilled, and the priestly blessing which Zechariah was unable to give (1:22) can now be given in its fullness by the glorified Messiah. This is the blessing promised to Abraham:

In your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

– Acts 3:25

Jesus has completed his *exodos* (9:31), the goal of his journey to Jerusalem (9:51). God, true to his promise, has vindicated his Messiah and all those who have come to believe.

Jesus no longer walks the earth with us as in the days before his death. But this is not a cause for sadness. He is in ‘heaven’, that is to say in God, enjoying that communion with God for which we all long. And he is still with his disciples, as he sends them back to the living temple of the praying community (see 1Corinthians 3:16). This is the central theme of the second and complementary part of Luke’s work in which we witness the action of Jesus’ Spirit continuing his mission and extending it to the whole world as long as history lasts.

The disciples are filled with joy and their hearts are lifted in praise to God as they await the promised Spirit, who will renew the face of the earth (see Acts 2:33).

⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.

⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

⁵² And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;

⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.