

CHAPTER ELEVEN: JESUS THE CRUCIFIED ONE WHO LIVES

The Gospels contain very little on the period following Jesus' death. Each gospel-writer has a section on the empty tomb describing how the women came to the tomb on the first day of the week following the Sabbath only to find that the body of Jesus was not there. The meaning that the empty tomb came to have for Jesus' disciples is portrayed in a vision in which it is revealed to the women that Jesus whom they are seeking is alive, still held in existence by God and enjoying communion with God. This tells us what the early church believed. If we wish to know why, we have to move on to the texts that portray the ways in which the disciples experienced Jesus as still present and active in their lives.

Mark ends his Gospel (16:8) with the empty tomb and the promise that the disciples will see Jesus in Galilee. A conclusion (Mark 16:9-20) was added later, which, while having its own perspective, is derived from the other Gospels.

Matthew has only one short scene portraying an encounter with Jesus on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-20). Jesus commissions the Eleven to go to the whole world with the gospel, promising to be with them. We are told that when they 'saw him, they fell down before him, though some hesitated' (Matthew 28:17). It might appear that Matthew is describing the kind of encounter we are used to, with the normal sense experiences of seeing and hearing, though with a mysterious air about the whole scene. But is that doing justice to the portrait? We note the significance of mountains in Matthew's Gospel: the mountain of temptation (Matthew 4:8), the mountain from which the new Law was proclaimed (Matthew 5:1), the mountain on which it is declared that Jesus fulfils the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 17:1-8), and the mountain of prayer whence came Jesus' saving action (Matthew 14:23). Does Matthew mention the 'hesitation' to indicate that the kind of 'seeing' he is speaking about is a faith-illumination, an awareness of Jesus' presence and of his empowering them to carry on his mission? What is the nature of the experience portrayed by Matthew?

Luke gives us two scenes. The first presents us with two despondent disciples journeying from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Someone joins them, walks with them, lifts up their hearts by explaining the scriptures to them and helping them to understand the significance of the crucifixion, and finally shares a meal with them. At the meal they recognize that the person is Jesus. They hurry back to tell the community and are assured that it was indeed Jesus because 'The Lord has risen and appeared to Simon' (Luke 24:34). There are quite mysterious elements in the portrait. We are told that their eyes were prevented from recognizing him while he walked with them (Luke 24:15-16) but were 'opened' at the evening meal. They realized who it was 'but he had vanished from their sight' (Luke 24:31). The symbolism in the portrait is obvious enough, especially the journey, the Eucharist, and the authority of the assembly. But how are we to understand the experience itself? Can we conclude that the risen body of Jesus has the same basic qualities as the body we now know, such that Jesus can walk, has much the same physique, and can converse, and eat; but that his voice and face are somehow different?

In Luke's second portrait, Jesus is present with the assembled community. As in Matthew, there is some hesitation, and doubts were arising in their hearts (Luke 24:38). Jesus reassures them that it really is himself and shows them the wounds that he bore for them. To prove that he is not a ghost, but is truly alive, he invites them to touch him and he eats with them. Are we

to conclude from this that our hands can actually touch the body of a person who is in the life beyond death? Are we to conclude that the Risen Jesus has the capacity to eat and digest the kind of food we eat? Is Luke stating that as a fact, or is that the imagery he uses to assert that what they experienced was indeed someone who is alive, and not a ghost from the underworld? In his conversation with them, Jesus 'opened their minds to understand the scriptures' (Luke 24:45). He spoke of the gift of the Spirit and the power of forgiveness, and he commissioned them to carry on his mission. Finally, he withdrew from them and was taken up into heaven. Once again, the symbolism is clear. Our question centres on the nature of the experiences portrayed in this richly symbolic literature.

The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple also has two scenes. The first is a personal encounter between Jesus and Mary of Magdala. We are told that 'she saw Jesus standing there, though she did not recognize him' (John 20:14). In fact, she comes to recognize him only when he calls her by name. The second scene is very like that of Luke. Jesus appears to the assembled community, speaks of peace, the gift of the Holy Spirit and forgiveness, and shares his mission with them. The element of doubt finds expression in a separate encounter which focuses on Thomas who learns to believe when he is invited to put his finger into the wounds that Jesus bears in his hands and put his hand into Jesus' pierced side. Is the text describing an actual physical encounter? Does the risen body of Jesus have qualities like those we now associate with our body such that it can be touched? Or must we look deeper to grasp the meaning of these portraits?

Similarly with the scene in John chapter 21, an appendix to the Gospel. The disciples go back fishing. Jesus appears on the shore and instructs them how to catch fish. They are successful. Jesus is recognized by the Beloved Disciple. Peter swims ashore and there is an intimate encounter of reconciliation in which Jesus makes Peter the chief pastor of the flock. At the same time, we find this rather strange statement: "None of the disciples was bold enough to ask: Who are you? They knew quite well it was the Lord' (John 21:12). What is being asserting by this remark?

It is important to know how to read this literature in such a way as to enjoy the rich meanings that the portraits convey.

I: THE POST-CRUCIFIXION EXPERIENCES OF JESUS' DISCIPLES

Jesus' disciples did not follow him all the way to the cross. They lost heart, abandoned him and scattered. Yet, shortly after his death we find them together again in Jerusalem. We find them speaking openly and enthusiastically about Jesus, telling everyone that he is alive. In speaking like this they encountered the same opposition that had engineered Jesus' death, but they would not be silenced. They stated clearly their conviction that the crucified Jesus has entered into life-beyond-death, the ultimate life with God. Furthermore, their preaching was convincing. History witnesses to the rapid and extraordinary growth and spread of Christianity. What happened to the disciples between their scattering and their coming together again? What did they experience that made such a powerful impression on them, gave them such courage and conviction, and carried them through persecution and even martyrdom?

The earliest account we have is in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: 'In the first place I taught you what I had been taught myself, namely that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures; that he was buried; and that he was raised to life on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures; that he appeared first to Cephas and secondly to the Twelve. Next he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died; then he appeared to James, and then to all the apostles; and last of all he appeared to me, too' (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

Paul is listing those whose authority can be called on to guarantee the truth of his preaching concerning Jesus' resurrection. Cephas, the acknowledged leader of the Christian community, had come to see that Jesus was alive. So had the Twelve. The whole of the Jerusalem church had experienced Jesus' presence in their midst. So had James, the leading presbyter in the early Jerusalem community, and the many apostles who set out from Jerusalem to take the good news into the Jewish communities in Judea, Samaria and beyond. Finally, Paul himself, the apostle to the Gentiles (non-Jews), asserts that Jesus had manifested himself to him as well.

Jesus appeared first to Cephas

'Cephas' is the Hebrew word for 'rock' (in Greek '*petros*' whence 'Peter'). According to the Gospels Peter was the first disciple to acknowledge his faith in Jesus. On that occasion Jesus is portrayed as speaking of him as the rock on which the Church will be built (Matthew 16:17-19). The importance of Peter in the early community is apparent from the New Testament. Mark mentions him twenty-one times. The first half of the Acts concentrates on Peter's mission. In addition to the two letters that claim Peter as their author, we find him mentioned in Paul's Letter to the Galatians (1:18, 2:7-14) and also in his First Letter to the Corinthians (1:12, 3:22, 9:5). In the resurrection material, he has central place among the disciples. In Mark the women at the tomb are told 'You must go and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee' (Mark 16:7). In Luke Peter's experience is presented as an assurance that what the Emmaus disciples assert is indeed true (Luke 24:34). We find an account of this experience in John chapter 21. The two features that this account highlights are Peter's experience of being forgiven, and his experience of being commissioned by the risen Jesus to carry out the task of leadership in the community.

All the gospels record Peter's denial of Jesus (Mark 14:66-72; Matthew 26:69-75; Luke 22:55-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27). John chapter 21 tells us that Peter, having fled Jerusalem and gone back to Galilee, returned to his former occupation as a fisherman. It is as though he was trying to forget all about Jesus and the hopes and dreams they had shared. However, in a mysterious scene by the lakeside Jesus made his presence known to Peter. They shared a meal and after the meal 'Jesus said to Simon Peter: "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?" Peter answered: "Lord, you know I love you". Jesus said to him: "Feed my lambs". A second time he said to him: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He replied: "Lord, you know I love you". Jesus said to him: "Look after my sheep". Then he said to him a third time: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was upset that he asked him a third time: "Do you love me?" and said: "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you". Jesus said to him: "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

In his account of the Last Supper Luke has Jesus say: 'Simon! Simon! Satan you must know has got his wish to sift you all like wheat; but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brothers' (Luke 22:31-32). Peter's faith did not fail. He recovered and spent the rest of his life strengthening his brothers. Why? Because after Jesus' death Peter experienced Jesus present in his life, forgiving him and entrusting him with his mission. We cannot, of course, hope to comprehend the many intimate and mysterious ways in which Peter was aware of the presence of Jesus, but it is these two aspects (being forgiven and being entrusted to carry out Jesus' mission) that are highlighted in the accounts we have. This experience of being loved, this enlightenment, led Peter to a faith-conviction that Jesus was alive. It also brought with it the power to transform his life and sustain him in his journey of discipleship.

Jesus appeared secondly to the Twelve

What happened to Peter seems to have happened to the others. The themes of forgiveness and mission recur in the post-crucifixion narratives. Luke speaks of the disciples being commissioned by Jesus to preach 'in his name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins to all the nations' (Luke 24:47). The Beloved Disciple writes: 'The disciples were filled with joy when they saw the Lord, and he said to them: Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you. After saying this he breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained' (John 20:20-23). We find the same theme in Peter's speeches in the Acts: 'It was the God of our ancestors who raised up Jesus to be leader and saviour, to give repentance and forgiveness of sins through him to Israel. We are witnesses to all this' (Acts 5:30-31; see 10:43).

It is a fact that after Jesus' death his disciples did continue his mission, and they understood it as a mission to free people from sin, from everything that trapped and distracted them and led them along a path that was futile and meaningless. The link between their despair at Jesus' death and their powerful and convincing witness was their own experience of being forgiven and commissioned by him.

The personal, intimate and religious nature of the experience of encounter with the risen Jesus is brought out in the stories that feature Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18) and the Emmaus disciples (Luke 24:13-35). The constant mention of doubt, hesitation, and non-recognition in the resurrection narratives highlights the need for a faith-illumination, a spiritual enlightenment, if a person is to recognize Jesus as present and active in his or her life.

Perhaps the most powerful and moving account of the conversion from doubt to faith is found in the final scene of the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple. It is the story of Thomas, told, no doubt, because it was typical of the conversion-journey experienced by many in those early days after Jesus' death. The other disciples had already encountered the risen Jesus. Thomas wants to see for himself: 'Unless I see the holes that the nails made in his hands, and can put my finger into the holes they made, and unless I can put my hand into his side, I refuse to believe' (John 20:25). Thomas wants to be convinced that it is Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified one, who is the one present to the disciples, forgiving them, calling them, commissioning them. Jesus manifests himself to Thomas and allows him the intimacy he requests. The scales fall from his eyes and in a profound religious experience he recognizes the presence of God in the Risen

Jesus: 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28). He knew, with the knowledge of one who 'be-lieves,' that Jesus is indeed alive in the embrace of God. This Good News changed Thomas, brought him into the community and started him on his missionary activity.

Jesus appeared to more than five hundred

After Peter and the Twelve, the next authoritative witness to the resurrection is the whole community of those who knew Jesus before his death and experienced his risen presence. Luke gives us one description of their experience in the second chapter of the Acts. There he describes how they were filled with the Spirit of the risen Jesus on the feast of Pentecost, and how they began to preach in Jesus' name with courage and conviction. Jews gathered for the feast, and, while speaking different languages, they found a common understanding in conversion to Jesus and entry into the community of his disciples.

Another statement of the way in which the community experienced the risen Jesus is found in the conclusion to Mark's Gospel: 'the Lord Jesus was taken up into heaven: there at the right hand of God he took his place, while they, going out, preached everywhere; the Lord working with them and confirming their word by the signs that accompanied it' (Mark 16:19-20).

James, all the missionaries, and Paul himself

By the time Paul was writing his letter to the Corinthians there had been over twenty years of missionary activity and thousands of people had experienced in their lives the presence and power of the risen Jesus. Paul reminds his readers of this and appeals to it as his final guarantee for the truth of his teaching (see 1 Corinthians 15).

Throughout the New Testament the presence and influence of the risen Jesus is spoken of in terms of the Spirit of God. The Spirit (breath) is God as life-giver. The Spirit that was present in the community, giving it life, was Jesus' Spirit, the Spirit of love that unites him to his Father. The community of Jesus' disciples found themselves living Jesus' life, sharing his mission, experiencing his prayer and his power.

The Beloved Disciple concludes Jesus' prayer at the Last Supper with the words 'so that the love with which you, Father, loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them' (John 17:26). That Jesus' prayer was answered can be seen from the following statement by Paul: 'Your interests are in the spiritual, since the Spirit of God has made a home in you. In fact, unless you possessed the Spirit of the Messiah you would not belong to him' (Romans 8:9; see Luke 12:12 and 21:14; Acts 16:6-7). The Spirit that gave life to the community was the Spirit of the risen Jesus. This is the 'power from on high' promised by Jesus (Luke 24:49). This is the Spirit that came down upon them at Pentecost (Acts 2). This is the Spirit that they could receive only after Jesus was glorified (John 7:38-39). The disciples found themselves becoming more and more like Jesus in their prayer, in their understanding, in their love; they found themselves healing as he had healed, liberating as he had liberated. The way they express it is to say that they were being transformed into him.

Paul writes: 'This Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect; this is the work of the Lord who is Spirit' (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). Paul speaks of the disciples as those chosen by God to be 'true images of his Son' (Romans 8:29). He speaks of them as 'God's work of art created in Christ Jesus to live the good life' (Ephesians 2:10). They are those who 'have the mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2:16). Paul says of himself: 'Life to me, of course, is Christ' (Philippians 1:21) and 'I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:19). This, for Paul, was the essential characteristic of a disciple. He wrote to the Corinthians: 'Examine yourselves to make sure you are in the faith; test yourselves: Do you acknowledge that Jesus Christ is really in you? If not, you have failed the test' (2 Corinthians 13:5).

The love that characterized the Christian community was recognized as love from God, and as the love that characterized Jesus (Romans 5:5). The prayer that arose in their hearts was the prayer of Jesus (Romans 8:14-27), the prayer that caused them, like Jesus, to cry to God as 'Abba' (Romans 8:14-15; Galatians 4:6). They experienced a conversion in their lives: 'Now you have been washed clean, and sanctified, and justified through the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and through the Spirit of our God' (1 Corinthians 6:11). 'Remember it is God himself who assures us all and you, of our standing in Christ, and has anointed us, marking us with his seal and giving us the pledge, the Spirit that we carry in our hearts' (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). Paul prays: 'May the God of hope bring you such joy and peace in your faith that the power of the Holy Spirit will remove all bounds to hope' (Romans 15:13).

Behind all these references to the Spirit of God (the communion which the risen Jesus enjoys with God) lie the many ways in which Jesus' disciples experienced him as being alive in their midst and gifting them with his life. So it is that Matthew has the risen Jesus commissioning his disciples to go forth to the whole world baptising them, as Jesus himself had been baptised, with the overwhelming experience that God is indeed their Father. This is baptism in the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). So it is that Luke has the risen Jesus promise: 'Now I am sending down to you what the Father has promised. Stay in the city until you are clothed with the power from on high' (Luke 24:49). So it is that John has Jesus breathe on the disciples and say, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (John 20:22).

The Christian community is called the 'body of Christ'. In New Testament terminology the 'body' is that which is given life by the 'spirit'. We tend to think of our 'body' as confined within the physical limits of our flesh. Their idea was different. For them the 'body' means the self and includes everything that belongs to a person, everything that has its being from the 'spirit' of a person. When the Church is spoken of as a 'body', the reference is not to an organized corporation (though of course organization is needed), but to the fact that the life experienced in the community is life given by the Spirit of Jesus. The Church is therefore the body of the Risen Jesus, in which the effects of his Spirit are realised. Every activity shared in by the Church has the effect of 'building up the body of Christ' (Ephesians 4:12; see also Romans 12:4-5, 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, 12:12-27, Ephesians 1:23, 2:16, 3:6, 4:4, 4:16, 5:23; Colossians 1:18, 1:24, 2:17, 2:19, 3:15).

In a special way Jesus' disciples experienced themselves being the 'body' of Jesus when they gathered in his name and broke bread. It was in the assembly that they remembered Jesus as he had requested (1 Corinthians 11:25, Luke 22:19). It was there that the sacred scriptures were proclaimed, understood now in the light of Jesus' life, death and exaltation; it was there that their hearts burned within them as the meaning of Jesus' life and death and of their own was revealed to them. It was when they broke bread together that they shared his Spirit, each in his or her own way, for they knew that Jesus 'distributes different gifts to different people just as he chooses' (1 Corinthians 12:11). It was there that they experienced communion. It was there, especially, that they experienced his 'real presence' among them, nurturing them, inspiring them, forgiving them, and calling them into the intimacy of prayer. And it was from the assembly that they experienced the living Jesus sending them on a mission of love to spread the good news. As Paul writes: 'If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow in all ways into Christ, who is the head by whom the whole body is fitted and joined together, every joint adding its own strength, for each separate part to work according to its function. So, the body grows until it has built itself up, in love' (Ephesians 4:15-16).

The gospel-writers capture this in their post-crucifixion accounts. It is 'while he was with them at table' in Emmaus that Jesus revealed his presence to the two disciples (Luke 24:30, 35). In the same way 'he showed himself to the Eleven themselves while they were at table' (Mark 16:14; see Luke 24:33; Acts 1:4; John 20:19).

By the time Paul was writing his letters, and by the time the experiences of the communities had been reflected on, and told and re-told in the stories that found their way into the gospels (the last third of the first century), many thousands of people had heard the good news as preaching spread throughout the Empire. Many thousands had been received into the community through baptism, experiencing reconciliation and forgiveness of sins and a conversion of life. Many thousands witnessed to the faith-inspired conviction and assurance that in all this it is Jesus himself who is at work. Their experiences were real. Their interpretation of them rested on the understanding of the first generation of followers who have 'been with us the whole time that the Lord Jesus was travelling round with us right from the time when John was baptizing until the day when he was taken up from us' (Acts 1:21-22). It was these who recognised that the one forgiving, calling, inspiring and sending them was indeed Jesus of Nazareth.

Did Peter and the others in the immediate post-crucifixion period have quite distinctive experiences that were unlike anything Jesus' disciples have had since? No doubt this is possible. But it seems to me sufficient to say that Peter is the rock on which the Church is built (Matthew 16:18), and the apostles are the foundation of the Church (Ephesians 2:20), not because their post-crucifixion experiences of Jesus were different, but rather because it was they, and they alone, who could interpret those experiences. They were in a position to remember Jesus, to recognize his presence and action, and to link the one who was forgiving and inspiring them with Jesus of Nazareth. It is their faith-conviction, based on real, actual post-crucifixion experiences, that enables others since to recognize in their own experiences the presence of the living Jesus.

II: WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING AND EXPRESSING POST-CRUCIFIXION EXPERIENCES

The gospel portraits of the risen Jesus make it clear that those who experienced him were not dealing with a resuscitated Jesus, living again the kind of life he lived before his death and with the same kind of body. It is also clear from all the accounts that they were not experiencing a ghost, but rather a real, living, person. Some of the ways in which they express this truth could make us think that the risen body was very like the body we now experience. We must be careful not to let our imagination take over. We must also remember that we are looking at portraits, and not flipping through a photo album. Paul warns us: 'Someone may ask: How are dead people raised and what sort of a body do they have when they come back?' He adds: 'They are stupid questions' (1 Corinthians 15:35). The disciples insist that they experienced a real, living, person (in scriptural terms a living body); they are not claiming to describe the nature of the risen body, or explore the scientific question of the nature of matter.

With this caution in mind, let us explore four models used by the gospel-writers to speak of Jesus in his existence after death. These are ways in which they came to understand him from their experiences of him after the crucifixion.

Jesus is alive

Some texts are content to state the fact that Jesus is 'alive' (see Luke 24:5, 24:23, Acts 1:3, 25:19). We are reminded of Jesus' words to the Sadducees: 'God is God not of the dead but of the living; for to God all people are in fact alive' (Luke 20:37-38). This is beautifully expressed by Jesus at the Last Supper: 'I will not leave you orphans; I will come back to you. In a short time, the world will no longer see me; but you will see me, because I live, and you will live' (John 14:18-19). The world will not see him, because the seeing is not a matter of physical sight but of enlightenment. The seeing will be a seeing of the heart and mind illumined by faith: an experience had by those who could say with Paul: 'I live no longer I. It is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20).

Jesus is assumed into heaven (into the presence of God)

Certain exceptional people in the history of Israel were thought of as having been assumed into heaven: Enoch (Genesis 5:24), Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5-6) Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), Jeremiah (1 Maccabees 2:58), and others (Psalm 49:15). The New Testament writers use this same model to speak of Jesus (see Acts 1:2,9,11,22; Luke 9:51; Mark 16:19; 1 Timothy 3:16). The Beloved Disciple, as usual stressing Jesus' freedom, prefers a more active word. He speaks of Jesus 'going up' to heaven, rather than being 'taken up' (see John 1:51, 3:13, 6:62, 20:17). The New Testament speaks of Jesus having been 'raised on high' (John 3:14, 8:28, 12:32, 12:34; Acts 2:33, 5:31; Philippians 2:9, Hebrews 7:26). These expressions assert, not only that Jesus is alive, but that he is with God.

Jesus is glorified

We speak of a glorious day when the beauty of the day (the trees, the flowers, the sky, the smiling people) is so radiantly manifest that we are moved to rejoice. The word is used frequently in the Scriptures for the wonder, power, love and beauty of the Creator that is manifest in the events of this world and in nature. Isaiah was overwhelmed by the presence of

God in the Temple. In his ecstasy he saw two seraphs who 'cried out one to another in this way: holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts. His glory fills the whole earth' (Isaiah 6:3).

A favourite image for God's real but mysterious presence is that of the shekinah or 'glory-cloud'. The Scriptures speak of the cloud covering the Temple, surrounding the people, and coming down on the mountain. It is a way of indicating God's mysterious presence. The idea is captured in the final words of the Book of Exodus: 'The cloud (glory-cloud) covered the Tent of Meeting and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because of the cloud that rested on it and because of the glory of God that filled the tabernacle. Whenever the cloud rose from the tabernacle the sons of Israel would resume their march. If the cloud did not rise, they waited and did not march until it did. For the cloud of Yahweh rested on the tabernacle by day, and a fire shone within the cloud by night, for all the House of Israel to see. And so it was for every stage of their journey' (Exodus 40:34-38).

Luke speaks of Mary being caught up in the cloud at the moment of Jesus' conception (Luke 1:35). The disciples on the mountain of Transfiguration (Mark 9:7; Matthew 17:5; Luke 9:34) are in the cloud.

When people die and are buried, we can no longer see them. When Luke comes to speak of what happened to Jesus, he says 'a cloud took him from their sight' (Acts 1:9). He is speaking of the glory-cloud. Jesus was caught up in the embrace of God. When God's majesty, power, love and beauty were revealed in the experiences of the early Christian community, it was Jesus whose presence was so powerfully manifested. It was radiantly obvious to them that it was the Spirit of Jesus that filled them. It was this Spirit that was powerfully drawing all people to Jesus, living now in the glory of God.

It seems that the concept of glory in relation to Jesus was first associated with the final manifestation of Jesus when history reaches its climax in the so-called Last Judgment. This was something to which the early community looked forward. They believed that Jesus was present in their midst. The glorious manifestation of his presence, however, was still to come. This seems to be the idea in Mark: 'Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory; then too he will send the angels to gather his chosen from the four winds, from the ends of the world to the ends of heaven' (Mark 13:26-27; Mark 8:38). Matthew follows Mark in this (Matthew 16:27, 19:28, 24:30, 25:31), as does Luke (9:26, 21:27).

That Jesus is in the glory of God will be manifest when God's will triumphs and God's justice is seen to prevail. This is sometimes spoken of as the 'parousia' ('presence manifested'; see 2 Thessalonians 1:10; Titus 2:13; 1 Peter 4:13). The Beloved Disciple, reflecting back over the life of Jesus, sees the beginnings of this glory already present in the wonder of Jesus' person and actions. In his Prologue he writes: 'We saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). The first signs of this glory were seen in the life of Jesus (John 2:11; see 7:39), but the hour of his glorification, according to the Beloved Disciple, was the hour of his complete self-giving, and final life-giving: the hour of his crucifixion. Jesus, though dead, was alive, for from his pierced heart the life-giving Spirit poured forth (John 19:34).

This same idea seems to be in the mind of the Synoptics when they speak of the veil of the temple being torn at the moment of Jesus' death (Mark 15:37; Matthew 27:51; Luke 23:45). The veil was there to symbolize the inability of people to look on the face (the glory) of God. Now, at this supreme moment of Jesus' life, the veil is torn asunder. Now we can look on the face of Jesus and see there the glory of God (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Looking at the post-crucifixion experiences of the disciples, we find the New Testament writers speaking of Jesus as having entered his glory (Luke 24:26): 'He is the radiant light of God's glory and now he has gone to take his place in heaven' (Hebrews 1:3; also Hebrews 2:7,9). Paul uses the same imagery (Romans 6:4; Philippians 3:21; 2 Corinthians 4:4), as does Peter (1 Peter 1:21; see Acts 3:13).

To speak of Jesus being glorified is to speak of the wonder and praise that was aroused because of the liberation in people's lives through Jesus' action in the community of his disciples: action which radiantly manifested the healing and redeeming love of God.

Jesus is resurrected

In the Isaiah scroll we find evidence for the belief that God would vindicate the just person (Isaiah 52:13-53:12), and in the Book of Wisdom (chapter 3) and in Daniel (chapter 7) we find evidence of the Greek concept of the immortality of the soul. However, it is only with the heroic self-sacrifice of the martyrs of the anti-Syrian war (168-165 BC) that we find explicit statements of a conviction that God would ultimately conquer even death and restore his faithful ones to life. As they buried their loved ones and knew that their bodies would lie corrupting in their graves, the people began to hope that on the day of God's judgment, these bodies would be restored to life, and that, in this way, their death would be vindicated. Not everyone thought in this way. Because the idea was not to be found in the ancient tradition, the Sadducees rejected it as heretical (see Acts 23:8).

The disciples of Jesus found in this expression the best way of declaring what had happened already to Jesus. Before analysing in detail what the New Testament has to say on this subject, let us be clear about what the documents are not saying. Firstly, they are not asserting that the risen body is like the body we now know. Secondly, they are not asserting that the risen body is such as to be able to be seen with our physical eyes. We have already referred to the fact that Paul dismissed as being 'stupid' curious questions about the kind of body we have in the risen life (1 Corinthians 15:35). We think in images, and the only images we have of the human body are those drawn from our own experience. We cannot hope to imagine correctly the body that belongs to the life-beyond-death. This element of mystery permeates all the gospel resurrection stories.

Likewise, the words translated 'see' in these same stories are not referring explicitly to physical sight. The most common word, Greek *horao*, derives from the same source as our word 'aware'. It can quite accurately be translated 'be aware of'. We find it being used of an evil spirit 'seeing' Jesus (Mark 9:20). Obviously, there is no implication that the spirit had an ocular sensation! We find it being used of 'seeing' God (Matthew 5:8). This is not to say that there was no ocular sensation involved in the resurrection appearances; though one may well wonder whether a physically blind disciple would have missed anything. What we are saying is

that the 'seeing' is an enlightenment of the mind and heart, a 'seeing' that requires faith. Mary Magdalene recognized Jesus not with her eyes but with her heart when he called her by name (John 20:16). The disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized Jesus not with their eyes (Luke 24:16) but in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:31). The 'eyes' that were opened were the 'eyes' of their minds, opened to understand the meaning of the scriptures (Luke 24:27, 32). The disciples by the lakeside clearly did not recognize the risen Jesus with their physical eyes (John 21:12). The word 'see' in relation to the risen Jesus stands for a perception of faith and love, a recognition by the heart, an awareness and conviction that flows from an insight born of revelation.

The appearance accounts are not presenting us with visual snap-shots, but with profound statements of faith-experience, told and re-told, because what happened to Mary and to Thomas and to the disciples by the lake, what happened to the community assembled at the Eucharist and at Pentecost, was typical of the experiences had by many people after Jesus' death.

There was something special about the 'seeing' of Jesus' disciples (John 20:29; 1 Peter 1:8). Their seeing was a recognizing, for, having seen Jesus prior to his death, they were able to recognize that the one they were experiencing in the period after the crucifixion was the same Jesus of Nazareth whom they had known. It was the crucified one who was now alive and active among them.

The word 'risen' translates two Greek words. The first is *'egeiro'*, which basically means to 'awaken', in the sense of gathering one's thoughts and feelings that have been scattered in sleep (Matthew 1:24, 2:13-14, 2:20-21, 8:25, 25:7, 26:46). *'egeiro'* is also used of a person who stirs himself to activity (Matthew 8:15, 8:26, 9:5-7, 9:19, 12:11, 17:7). On a number of occasions, it is used to convey the idea of a person being awakened from the sleep of death back to this life (Matthew 9:25, 10:8, 11:5, 14:2). It is not surprising then that the same imagery is used to give expression to the idea of being awakened from the sleep of death into the life-beyond-death with God. Matthew uses it in this sense of the 'resurrection' (Matthew 16:21, 17:9, 23; 20:19, 26:32, 27:52-53, 63-64). The idea being conveyed is that God wakened Jesus from the 'sleep' of death to a new life.

The second Greek verb *'anhistemi'* and the noun *'anastasis'* means to 'stand up'. In relation to Jesus, it is conveying the image of Jesus lying prostrate in the tomb, and then standing up to carry on his life and activity. Obviously, we are dealing with an image. What the resurrection concept adds to the concepts of life, exaltation and glorification, is the belief that the one who lives and is assumed into heaven and is in the glory of God is experiencing a full, though transformed, human life. Death has been conquered.

The disciples had distinct human, personal experiences. Certain definite things happened to them. We looked at some of these experiences in the first part of this chapter. The effect of these experiences, happening as they did to so many people in so many different ways, caused them to come to the realization in faith (call it illumination, revelation, seeing) and the conviction that Jesus was alive and present in their lives and history. They articulated this belief in a number of symbolic images and expressed it in the appearance stories of the Gospels, particularly the gospels of Luke and the Beloved Disciple. These, like the parallel stories of

Paul's conversion in the Acts (9:1-27, 22:1-21, 26:9-23), express in story form the enlightenment they experienced and their conversion to faith in Jesus. He is alive. More than that, physical death has been shown not to have the last word. This was the ultimate proof of God's love and the ultimate source of their hope. If not even death can separate us from God's love, we have nothing to fear and are liberated to live in faith and hope and love.

III: THE EMPTY TOMB

All four gospels record the fact that some of the women went to the tomb on the first day of the week, only to find that the body of Jesus that had been buried there on the Friday evening was not there. Before looking at the material more closely, let us establish what the Gospels are not saying. It is obvious that the empty tomb is not presented as a proof of the resurrection. The resurrection cannot be proven in any scientifically satisfying way. It does not belong to the empirical order. What is evident is that the disciples, from being scattered, came back together again, and that they shared a conviction based on real, actual experiences. Their interpretation of their experiences cannot be refuted, nor can it be established. It is a faith-interpretation. It made sense to their minds, it convinced their hearts, and their lives are perhaps the best argument for their belief. We have already looked at some of the experiences on which their faith was based. It was not founded on the empty tomb. This is obvious from the texts themselves.

Mark concludes his account with the words: 'The women came out and ran away from the tomb because they were frightened out of their wits; and they said nothing to a soul, for they were afraid' (Mark 16:8). 'They said nothing to a soul'. The 'seeing' of Jesus was to take place in Galilee (Mark 16:7).

Matthew's account is basically the same as Mark's (Matthew 28:1-8) except that in Matthew: 'Filled with awe and great joy the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell the disciples' (Matthew 28:8). As in Mark, the recognition was to take place in Galilee (Matthew 28:7; see 28:16-20).

Luke is even more explicit. When the women discover that the body of Jesus is not in the tomb 'they stood there not knowing what to think' (Luke 24:4), and when they told the apostles: 'this story of theirs seemed pure nonsense, and they did not believe them' (Luke 24:11).

The faith of the apostles in the resurrection is based on personal encounters with Jesus, not on anything as ambiguous as an empty tomb. In the Beloved Disciple's account Mary concludes: 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him' (John 20:2). Her conclusion turns out to be wrong, but only because of her encounter with Jesus, or rather his encounter with her. The only one portrayed as believing on discovering the empty tomb is the Beloved Disciple (John 20:8). In other words, the empty tomb can be a sign of the resurrection, but only to the eyes of one who loves.

This is the role of the empty tomb in Christian piety. The early Jerusalem community, and later pilgrims, came to the empty tomb. What more powerful symbol could there be to celebrate the power of God over death? Death was 'swallowed up in victory' (1 Corinthians 15:54). 'Death shall be no more' (Revelation 21:4-5). The empty tomb stood as a token of an already

existing faith, already existing because of the confirmatory experiences had by those who followed Jesus. It is these experiences that gave meaning to the empty tomb. Mark's account seems to be saying this by the ordering of his words: 'He has risen (experiences), he is not here (in the empty tomb)' (Mark 16:6).

The gospel accounts seem to present what was an early liturgical re-enacting of the community's faith. The pilgrims would come with their lighted candles to the tomb, and there celebrate, as we still do in our liturgy, their faith in the resurrection of Jesus. In typical Biblical style, the empty tomb is portrayed as a theophany. It is God who illumines their minds to understand the reason for the empty tomb: Jesus is risen. That Jesus is risen was discovered by the first disciples when they returned to Galilee: it is there that they 'saw' him. The pilgrims would have to discover him also in their own lives.

Writing for the frightened, persecuted community of Rome, Mark ends his Gospel with the promise 'they will see me in Galilee'. He is inviting the community to faith. Each person and each community has to go on with their life in trust. Moses had to journey into the unknown, sustained by God's promise to be with him; so also, disciples of Jesus must walk in faith, even though persecution. Only in the journey itself will we know the presence, the power and the peace of the risen Jesus, and of his Father in whose glory he is living.

Matthew adds that this meaning that the empty tomb came to have was itself a revelation of Jesus. He was present to the women even in the emptiness of the cemetery (Matthew 28:9-10). Jesus did indeed meet them in Galilee, on the mountain of prayer; for it was in Galilee that they re-grouped and became aware of Jesus commissioning them to 'Go, make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28:19). In this mission, they were sustained by the promise 'Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time' (Matthew 28:20).

Conclusion

After his death, Jesus graced his disciples with certain privileged experiences of his presence and love. These experiences find expression in the gospel portraits of Jesus' appearances. They also provide the meaning of the empty tomb. The appearances express the faith; the empty tomb symbolizes it. The faith is not based on the portraits; they are based on the faith. The faith is grounded in personal, intimate, experiences had by Jesus' disciples.

The 'resurrection of Jesus' is the most compelling and satisfactory way of speaking of Jesus being with God and with his disciples, for it speaks of the transformation of his human nature by God. It is however only that: a way of speaking, an imperfect model. That Jesus is alive is absolutely central to Christianity. It is central because it is the ground of our conviction that the good news is true. God was indeed faithful and loving to Jesus; so we can trust that God will be so to us as well. Life is meaningful, even in the face of death. It was for Jesus; we can hope it will be for us. Our experience of the life of God has a special Jesus-quality about it now. It is the living Jesus who calls us to follow him, invites us into prayer-intimacy with him, inspires us to love as he loves, and enables us to do so by his present love flooding our hearts. We are able to call God 'Abba', because we are brothers and sisters of Jesus. He is praying for us now in the presence of his Father (Romans 8:34, Hebrews 7:25). He is sending us now on a mission of love to the whole of creation, to convince the world that it is loved and that therefore it can

love. There is no need now for sin, or distraction, or the dissipation of energy in anger, frustration and violence. Peace is possible.

All of this, in fact the whole of the Christian faith and way of living, rests on the wonder, joy and astonishment of the good news that the crucified one is indeed risen and alive and with us on our journey till the end of time.

This means that, while we expend our energy in trying to bring about the reign of God's love here on earth, at the same time we recognize that for us, as for Jesus, our hope is not limited by death. Death is the horizon beyond which we cannot see, but it is not the end of life. The threat of death cannot reduce us to impotence, any more than it deflected Jesus from his path. There is no question of taking our eyes away from this world in which we live. We are to live here and now, and this life is the only one we are equipped to live.

There is no escape from it, nor can an other-worldly piety substitute for giving our lives to bring about the reign of God 'on earth as in heaven' (Matthew 6:10). But while we give all our hearts and minds and strength to the healing and strengthening of the human condition, we are freed from measuring everything within the horizons of birth and death. Jesus' resurrection opens up eternal possibilities. The goal of all our activity is fullness of life beyond death.

Moreover, we ought not deny or ignore the kind of mystical experience that Saul of Tarsus had on the road to Damascus, to which generation after generation of Christians have since witnessed. Of course, we can deceive ourselves, and we can be deceived; we can misinterpret and misunderstand. But false mysticism does not rule out authentic mysticism. And if Jesus is alive in God, why could he not do what many a saint has claimed he has done, and choose, love, trust and commission us to be his disciples? Paul could write: 'I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20).

Belief in the resurrection of Jesus is basic to Christianity. Paul wrote: 'If Christ has not been raised then our preaching is useless, and your believing it is useless' (1 Corinthians 15:14). The resurrection gives us an ultimate perspective on suffering and death and is the ground of our belief in the fidelity of God. Freed from the fear of death we are free to live.

Sharing in Jesus' Eternal Communion with God

We are graced now to 'become participants of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4), sharing Jesus' Spirit, his intimate communion with God. In the First Letter of John we are assured: 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is' (1 John 3:2).

The Apocalypse offers us the following symbolic portrait of the Risen Jesus in glory:

'I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me,
and on turning I saw seven golden lamp stands,
and in the midst of the lamp stands
I saw one like the Son of Man clothed with a long robe
and with a golden sash across his chest.

his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow;
his eyes were like a flame of fire,
his feet were like brass, refined as in a furnace,
and his voice was like the sound of many waters
In his right hand he held seven stars, and
from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword
and his face was like the sun shining with full splendour' (Apocalypse 1:12-16).

The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple includes Jesus' prayer: 'Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world' (John 17:24).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews assures us the glorified Jesus is praying for us: 'He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them' (Hebrews 7:24, 25). 'Christ entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf' (Hebrews 9:24).