

Confused About the Resurrection? Join the Club!

Ken Wilson 4.24.2022

I've been trying to make sense of the resurrection since I first read the gospels, age 19. I was in need of a "Higher Power" as I felt my own powers were insufficient for my responsibilities. My portal into engaging a Higher Power was and is the figure I met in the gospels, which cannot help but raise the question of resurrection. We lean into different sources at different times for our faith. On a long drive yesterday, I listened to Julia singing Easter hymns: *The Strife is O'er, Christ the Lord is Risen Today, Welcome Happy Morning* and others. The mood was majestic, inspiring, hopeful in the face of death. Easter hymns: window into resurrection.

As a long-time reader of the gospels, one picks up a different vibe around resurrection—maybe confused fascination. This year I paid attention to how the various accounts differ. If Jesus died around 26CE, earliest mention of resurrection is by Paul in 1 Cor. 15, dated around 50CE. The earliest gospel, Mark, is a little later, then Matthew, then Luke, then John (about 90 CE).

There are lots of differences between gospels. Mark, Matthew, and Luke are most similar; John quite different than all three. Much more harmony around the crucifixion, but then it gets jagged on Easter morning on. You should have seen me going back and forth to compare and contrast, to jot down the differences to keep them straight. I was using my most beat up NRSV Annotated Study Bible. Took me a couple of hours, then Julia waltzes in from her office and I told her what I was up to, and she says, "Oh try University of Toronto site—they have a feature that allows you put all four gospels side by side on one page." Next time.

When you compare these accounts and see the differences one thing is obvious: whoever compiled each of these, did not consult with the others to get their stories straight. Common threads, yes, but also differing and sometimes conflicting details. Careful readers comparing the accounts end up mirroring the confusion the earliest disciples are depicted as having.

The earliest, 1 Cor. 15 is a quick summary: **"first Jesus appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve, then to 500 followers at one time, then to James, then to all the apostles, then years later to me."** All four gospels say Jesus made earliest appearances to women; none mention the 500. None indicate an appearance to Judas, one of the twelve. What the hey ho!

The earliest gospel, Mark, is the most confused because different ancient manuscripts of Mark have four different endings. The earliest manuscript ends abruptly: Mary Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome arrive at the tomb, to find "a young man dressed in a white robe" sitting there to report Jesus isn't there, he's awakened. Go tell Peter and the disciples. Then this oldest version of Mark ends with **"Then they went bolting out of the tomb, convulsed and out of their minds with shock. But they said nothing to anyone, as they were terrified."** Other versions of Mark (later ones) have more proper endings, but even then, some details don't jive.

Somewhat later than Mark is Matthew, with a slightly different set of women visiting the tomb on Sunday morning. Matthew adds, ***“there was a great earthquake and an angel descended from the sky, rolled away the large stone, sat on it, who tells them to go tell the others that Jesus will meet them In Galilee.”*** In Matthew, Jesus only appears to the Marys and some other women in Jerusalem, and only appears to the men when they eventually go back up North to Galilee.

I should mention Mark and Matthew both report an earthquake at the moment of Jesus’ death on Friday, and Matthew adds that many dead people rose from their graves in Jerusalem—no one else mentions this extraordinary detail, which is probably a theological point rather than an historical one, par for the course in ancient writings. Either way, it’s so inexplicable, the heavily footnoted New Oxford Annotated Study Bible, doesn’t include a footnote about this.

Luke’s gospel, with access to Mark and Matthew, has two Marys but also a “Joanna” arriving at an empty tomb, but now, “two men, in garments that looked like lightening” tell them Jesus is awakened. They report this to the 11 disciples, who regard their report as nonsense. Luke then offers a unique report of two disciples on a walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus Sunday afternoon. A stranger joins them and Luke records an extended and psychologically astute encounter with the stranger, who acts as though he hasn’t heard of the events in Jerusalem. These disciples are sad and baffled about empty tomb rumors. The stranger expounds on how the Law of Moses and the prophets might shed light on the events. As evening falls, they arrive at an Inn, where the stranger joins them for a meal and when he blesses the bread—Poof! They recognize the stranger as Jesus, and he disappears. Later, they remember their hearts burning within them when he spoke to them on the road and hurry back to Jerusalem to tell the others. So the accounts themselves when compared, have confusing details, but they also depict the disciples in various states of confusion.

John’s gospel is the latest and by now the jagged edges have been worn off. Instead, a series of appearances that read like psychological realism, a form of writing we associate with the modern era. First Mary of Magdala at the empty tomb, encounters someone she takes to be the gardener, until she realizes it’s Jesus and falls at his feet weeping. Then Jesus appears to 10 apostles (minus Judas and Thomas) who are hiding in a room in Jerusalem. A week later, Jesus appears to the same group plus Thomas; Jesus lets Thomas touch his scarred side. (So that’s fascinating: he’s risen, but his scars remain.) Weeks later in the Northern part of Israel, Peter and 4 others are out fishing all night, catch nothing, and someone from the shore calls out to them, suggests a place to put their nets, they have an incredible catch, and person on the shore, who is Jesus, serves them breakfast around a campfire, then a walk with Peter. If you were going to turn something into a play with 5 scenes, you’d used John.

Can you imagine being a New York Times reporter in Jerusalem, trying to sort this all out? The gospels don’t even try to sort it out. They let the disparities stand.

My favorites? Probably John and Mark. John because the Jesus I have a personal sense of, who has come into my imagination in occasionally vivid ways, the one I most trust, feels most like the post-Easter Jesus, even more so than the pre-resurrection Jesus in John. My other favorite is the oldest version of Mark, the one that ends so abruptly, which makes room for my more agnostic, wondering self—the, can-all-this-really-be-true? part of me. To recap: In the original ending of Mark, you have two Marys and a Salome at the empty tomb, a young man dressed in white saying he's awakened, and the gospel ends with this, ***“Then they went bolting out of the tomb, convulsed and out of their minds with shock. But they said nothing to anyone, as they were terrified.”*** Talk about an ending that says, “You fill in the blanks!” It's like the gospel of Mark, original ending, leaves the reader with an invitation to fill in the blanks for ourselves.

People who don't always pay attention to the differing details try to turn this into a story that fits together perfectly and demands belief with absolute certainty. I think that's what you get when you take these original documents, slap a thick coat of religious varnish on top, in order to sell a religious brand of certainty about matters that defy certainty.

If you strip away the varnish, you're left with a confusion that often goes along with wonder.

Just to tease that out a bit. I've learned to distrust two opposite approaches to the resurrection. First is the one I just mentioned: the thick religious varnish version that trucks in absolutes and certainties. I mean, how can any of us claim absolute certainty about anything having to do with the after-death experience? The other approach I've learned to distrust is mirror opposite: the debunkers who are certain it's all a load of bunk and you're an idiot to believe it. That's fine for a privileged white guy to assert (the demographic of most debunkers) but it's removing one of the most powerful parts of the story for oppressed people—since a risen Jesus represents a faith perspective that claims the murdered oppressed get the final word, and not their oppressors. That is a truly subversive thing to believe that empowers resistance to oppression.

I prefer the confused wonder approach—like when Diane does one her kid's minutes, tells a story and then ends with some open-ended “I wonder” questions.

Wonder has a few active ingredients—something beyond our normal expectations, curiosity, and confusion. In the Hebrew Bible and the Jesus Midrash called the New Testament, there is no word for miracle, no word for supernatural. The terms used are “sign” and “wonder”

We can each come up with our own I wonder questions

On Palm Sunday, Emily told the Easter story from Palm Sunday onwards, and how a risen Jesus is the voice of the oppressed that cannot be silenced. To me, today, that's the most compelling aspect of the resurrection.

I wonder what the world would be like if more people believed the universe is sending signals that, despite appearances, oppressors don't get the last word, and the oppressed do?

The closer I get, statistically to my expiration date, the possibility of resurrection provokes this I wonder question:

I wonder if a human personality, after death, continues in a different form that fits dimensions that go beyond our space-time four? I wonder what other hints there may be that such a thing is plausible.

The curious bible nerd in me has several I wonder question, which I'll pare down to two:

I wonder why Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all have Jesus appearing first to some women (named Mary, Mary, Johannes, Salome) but Paul doesn't mention the women?

I wonder how whoever wrote the gospel of John with such a limited Greek vocabulary, describes the encounters with a risen Jesus with such psychological subtlety? I wonder why I often like the risen Jesus in John, better than the flesh and blood Jesus of the earlier chapters?

The politically frustrated and concerned part of me has this I wonder question:

I wonder how people can claim any allegiance to Christianity and have any sense of sympathy or admiration or apathy to give Vladimir Putin a pass?

The historically curious part of me has this one:

I wonder how it was that this peasant carpenter rabbi from Galilee who died young along with so many other Jewish men, becomes the most famous Jewish figure in all the world?

And now after all these I wonder questions:

I wonder why I've spent most of my life wondering about things like this?

Let's close with maybe 30 seconds of quiet to formulate an "I wonder" question that resonates with you....