

He was Raised and has Appeared: Evidence and Faith

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What really happened on the first Easter had a wide range of ramifications. The resurrection of Jesus can be related to the Church's mission, to past history, to one's present faith, future expectations, personal justification and salvation. It is related to newness of life, the victory over death, the end of the law, and the defeat of sin. The difficulty in talking about the resurrection, then, for a Christian theologian is to give an adequate account of the extent of its meaning. Far too often in popular Catholic belief and theology (perhaps especially in Catholic theology) the resurrection has been thought of as a resuscitation of the flesh of Jesus Christ and as no more than an event which happened at a specific time and place in the past. Now, I am not going to argue that this was wrong in every respect, but it must be said that the great virtue of Hubert Richards' book *The First Easter: What Really Happened?* is that he has brought the dimension of faith and newness of life to something which had often been thought of as a *brutum factum* of past history. Richards' shift away from a traditional Catholic historicist understanding of the resurrection of Jesus is reflected by Fergus Kerr when he says, 'The resurrection of Jesus thus cannot be reduced to, or even specially concentrated upon, his restoration to bodily life.'¹ It does, however, seem to me that the approach of Hubert Richards—and of Fergus Kerr, in so far as they agree—does leave us with problems.

Hubert Richards suggests that the Apostles did not have sightings of the body of the risen Jesus which resulted in their Easter faith and subsequent preaching, but that they had some personal spiritual experience by which they saw (in a metaphorical sense) that Jesus had conquered death and that this faith experience led them to produce stories of appearances as a pictorial representation of what they had come to "see" (in a metaphorical sense).

¹ F Kerr, 'Easter and Exegesis', *New Blackfriars*, March 1977, page 108

Richards writes,

It needs some reflection to realise that they [the Easter stories] do not describe some event—a raising from the dead, an empty tomb, appearances—upon which faith was subsequently built. It was the other way round. What came first was the faith-experience, and the stories are a subsequent pictorial elaboration of that experience.

And again a few pages further on,

When the disciples grasped the fact that Jesus was not abandoned by God in his death they 'saw' the risen Christ. They did not see him first and only subsequently came to faith.²

It is being claimed, then, that the Apostles did not have sightings of Jesus, if the Loch Ness monster terminology may be excused, as the Gospels describe, but rather that they had experiences comparable with that of Paul described variously in Acts 9:1-9, 22:6-11, 26:12-18. The difficulty with this is that Richards leaves faith hanging in the air, so to say; he fails to ground faith by refusing to offer any evidence for it other than the faith of the Apostles which is no evidence. A positivistic claim to faith in the resurrection, like that put forward by Barth in his early days,³ is quite unacceptable and the faith of another man does not count as evidence for me. It must certainly be admitted, however, that in order to believe in the resurrection of Jesus we too need to experience it as something which transcends the past historical event, we each need our own Damascus road experience as it were. But even if we have each experienced in some sense the risen Christ, this alone is no basis on which to preach the Easter faith to others. Experience is necessary for faith, but so is evidence to legitimate that faith and Michael Dummett affirms this when he says that 'the statement that Jesus has been raised from the dead' must be 'something for which the Apostles could claim to have real evidence.'⁴ Is there, then, any evidence? And what would count as evidence? Well, someone having found the tomb to be empty would count as evidence, as would their having seen (in the ordinary sense) the risen Jesus. Moreover, I am not sure that there is anything else which would count as evidence. The question is, did the Apostles, for whatever laudable or despicable motive, fabricate the evidence, or did they really find the tomb empty and see (in the ordinary sense) Jesus?

Fergus Kerr has done a smart demolition job on the Gospel

² H. Richards, *The First Easter: What Really Happened?* London 1976, pages 50 and 59.

³ K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, London 1933.

⁴ M. Dummett, 'Biblical Exegesis and the Resurrection', *New Blackfriars*, March 1977 page 64.

narratives, but because these are relatively late texts which pose the greatest difficulties it may be as well to *begin* by looking elsewhere. I would like to examine the Acts of the Apostles, partly because this work is ignored by almost all writers on the resurrection. It is a difficult work to deal with because although it is about the history of the Church from roughly 30 AD to 64 AD, Luke only wrote it in 85 or maybe 90 AD and his elaboration of these early events is more likely to tell us about the preaching of his own community at the end of the first century than the history of the first generation of Christians. In addition Luke's historical veracity is usually taken with a pinch of salt because when Acts is compared with Paul's letters, and assuming that Paul himself knew better than anyone else what he was doing, we find that Luke has not given us an exact historical record of Paul's journeys in Asia Minor. Why, then, should we examine the Acts of the Apostles for evidence of the resurrection of Jesus? Acts contains a number of speeches which claim to have been given by Peter and Paul in the earliest years of the Church. It is generally agreed that these speeches have been elaborated by Luke and that they reflect the preaching of his Church in 90 AD, but there is also good reason for thinking that the kernel of the earliest preaching is to be found in these speeches. Can we discover the earliest preaching of the Church about the resurrection? C.H.Dodd has isolated these elements:⁵

But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death.

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses.
(Acts 2:24 and 32)

Whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.
(Acts 3:15)

Whom God raised from the dead. (Acts 4:10)

The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. And we are witnesses to these things.
(Acts 5:30 and 32)

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who are chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.
(Acts 10:39-41)

But God raised him from the dead; and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. He whom God raised up saw no corruption.
(Acts 13:30, 31 and 37)

⁵ C.H.Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development*, London 1963.

It may be argued that little credence can be given to these speeches, but the repeated use of often stereotyped phrases suggests that the material originated long before Luke and that we have here a record of the earliest Christian belief about the resurrection of Jesus. Martin Dibelius has suggested that an early written source may lie behind Peter's speech to Cornelius (Acts 10: 36-43)⁶ and because of oddities in the language used C.H.Dodd thinks that it records from an Aramaic source the belief of the Church in Jerusalem.⁷ This is not to suggest that it is a verbatim record of a speech by Peter, but that it contains the essence of the kerygma of the primitive Jerusalem Church. If this is true, three things are clear: from the earliest time the Church preached that God had raised Jesus from the dead and that the Apostles were witnesses; secondly, that at this stage there was no mention of an empty tomb; and thirdly, there were no appearance *stories*.⁸ If these parts of Acts do represent the earliest preaching of the Jerusalem Church, what would these claims have meant to a Jewish audience? Although the Sadducees and Samaritans did not accept belief in a resurrection, most Jews did in the first century and they believed in a resurrection of the body in a sense similar to that of Paul in I Corinthians 15. Those first century Jews would undoubtedly have understood the Apostles' message as an announcement about the revivifying of an actual body, albeit a spiritual body, though there seems to have been no expectation of an individual resurrection.⁹ As such there would have been no question for

⁶ M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, London 1956, page 165f.

⁷ C.H.Dodd, *Op. cit.* page 20f. and page 27f.

⁸ Fergus Kerr has recently maintained in this journal that the Q material presents the belief of an early Christian community that believed in the exalted and glorified Jesus without needing to refer to his passion and resurrection appearances (November 1976, page 506ff.). It is generally agreed that Q comes from a Palestinian source, but if Dodd and Dibelius are correct in what they say about the speeches in Acts it is out of the question to suggest that a Palestinian Christian community which had any contact with Jerusalem could have been unaware of the tradition of Jesus's passion and resurrection. Fergus Kerr may prefer to side with more sceptical critics on the historical value of these speeches in Acts (such as Edward Schweitzer, 'Zu den Reden der Apostelgeschichte', *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 1957, page 1ff. and Ulrich Wilckens, *Die Missionsreden der Apostelgeschichte: Form- und traditions-geschichtliche Untersuchungen, Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament* 5, 1961) but there remains the tradition of the resurrection used by Paul which he seems to have acquired in Jerusalem (see below). Even though Q as we are now able to reconstruct it has no reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is really inconceivable that the early Church in Palestine could have preached Jesus as the exalted Son of Man without having been aware of his death (see 1 Cor 11.23ff. 'For I received from the Lord what I delivered to you.... For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.') and resurrection (1 Cor 15.3ff. 'For I delivered to you...what I also received, that Christ died...that he was buried, that he was raised...and that he appeared....')

⁹ W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, London 1970, pages 298-303.

them of Jesus's body having remained in the tomb, and this is confirmed by Jewish attempts to suggest that the Apostles had stolen the body, which allegations are refuted in narrative form by Matthew (27:62-66; 28:11-15) and the apocryphal Gospel of Peter.¹⁰

What did Paul have to say about the resurrection? Hubert Richards and Fergus Kerr suggest that Paul had a simple spiritual experience and that the other Apostles at an earlier time had comparable experiences. Personally I do not find Paul's experience to have been quite so simple. According to Acts, Paul saw something, but it is not clear what, and he heard something. If we accept Luke's shorter version of what Paul heard, this would have been 'Saul, Saul why do you persecute me? I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise and enter the city [Damascus] and you will be told what you are to do.' (Acts 9:4-6). It is interesting, however, that when Paul offers evidence to the Christians in Corinth for the resurrection of Jesus he does not appeal to a dramatic personal spiritual experience, but to a series of actual appearances common to early Christian tradition:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the Apostles. Last of all, as to one born out of time, he appeared also to me. (I Cor 15:3-8)

It is true that Paul here presents his Damascus road experience on the same level as the several experiences of the Apostles, but this is not in terms of a spiritual experience but as an appearance, as a sighting of Jesus. Whatever Paul saw, he was able to identify it as the risen Jesus.

Let us take another case. In II Corinthians 12:2-4, when talking about visions and revelations, Paul does not describe his Damascus road vision but something which happened to him (for he is speaking about himself) in 41 AD. Could this be, as Wendland has suggested,¹¹ because what Paul saw and heard on the road to Damascus in, probably, 33 AD had an objective content that his later spiritual vision did not have?

In his first letter to Corinth (the first which has survived) Paul

¹⁰ See E.Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol 1, London 1963, page 185f.

¹¹ H.D.Wendland, *Die Briefe an die Korinther*, Regensburg 1946

is passing on a tradition which he has received. Where did he get the tradition from? If Jesus died in 30 AD, Paul was probably converted in 33 AD, he went to ground for three years partly, I suppose, because the other Christians did not yet trust him and also because he had a lot to learn and to think through (conversions take time to assimilate) and then maybe in 36 AD he came to Jerusalem for a fortnight where he met Peter and James (Gal 1:18). It is likely that it was here in Jerusalem from Peter that Paul learnt the tradition about the resurrection appearances of Jesus which he used in I Cor 15. If we accept Peter's speech to Cornelius in Acts 10 as containing a record of the earliest preaching, then even the tradition of eating and drinking with the risen Jesus is very old, much older than the Gospels. Unfortunately we cannot be certain that Luke has not here altered the early kerygma to conform with his own version of the post-resurrection appearances. Hubert Richards and Fergus Kerr are right, however, in claiming that the *stories* about these happenings only came later. This is also true of the story of the empty tomb, but the fact of the empty tomb must have been accepted from the beginning as a necessary corollary of belief in the resurrection of Jesus, given Jewish belief at that time. If Jesus had a raised body, it must have been the (transformed) entombed body—Paul had no doubt about this (I Cor 15:51-54) and Richards is quite wrong in saying that Paul 'would have found an empty tomb a distinct embarrassment.'¹² It would make no sense to say that Jesus had two bodies, a corrupting one in the tomb and a new raised body. How can we identify two bodies with one person? Which body would be Jesus? What would it *mean* to say that the Apostles had preserved the body of Jesus (rather like Lenin's) *and* to say that he is risen? The tomb, then, must have been empty if the resurrection happened, and the story of the empty tomb simply elaborates the necessary fact of the empty tomb. Did the Apostles, however, *find* the tomb to be empty on Easter day? From the textual evidence it is impossible to say. Yet even unbelieving Jews seem to have accepted the emptiness of the tomb in their polemic against the followers of the Nazarene. They would have been only too glad to have found the corpse of Jesus because that would have been clear evidence against the resurrection of Jesus, indeed for a first century Jew it would have made it impossible. It is equally implausible to suggest that the Apostles could not locate the tomb as unbelieving Jews would have been delighted to have been able to accuse the Christians of not even being able to find Jesus's tomb. They would have loved to have encountered a Christian apologist like Hubert

¹² H. Richards, *Op. cit.* page 35

Richards because he would have played straight into their hands when he says:

Jesus never recovers from his death. His resurrection is nothing other than that death seen with the eyes of God.¹³ The Jews, however, did not adopt any of these tactics; they had been forced to accept that the tomb had been located and that it was found to have been empty, and they had to counter this with accusations of tomb robbery. One can only protest against Ronald Gregor Smith, and those who follow him, when he says that Jesus has been raised and that from a hypothetical point of view his bones may still be in the tomb.¹⁴ If Jesus has been raised his rotted bones are not in that Palestinian tomb.

The varying and conflicting details in the stories in the Gospels of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus must make us sceptical about accepting them as historical narratives, but the difficulties presented by these stories need not undermine their basic historical credibility. Fergus Kerr shows that even though Matthew/Mark, Luke and John each have a different version of Jesus's last words, there can be no doubt that Jesus was crucified.¹⁵ Moreover, I think it likely that Jesus said something on the cross and that it is probable that he quoted from Psalm 22 as in Matthew/Mark and that this was altered by Luke and John. Similarly we can say that after his death and burial Jesus was seen by his disciples and that he spoke with them. What he said and the precise circumstances of his appearances are difficult to determine, though some attempt can be made. But just as Fergus Kerr can accept the historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus without being sure what his last words on the cross were, so we can accept the historicity of the bodily resurrection of Jesus while entertaining doubts about the secondary matter of where, when and how the post-resurrection appearances took place. What can be said, and what needs to be said if we are to have some sort of evidence for our faith, is that Jesus was seen (in the ordinary sense) by his disciples and that he spoke with them. After all is said and done, how can we know that 'death is swallowed up in victory' unless Jesus was seen to be alive?

¹³ *Ibid.* page 125

¹⁴ R. Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity*, London 1966, page 103. Hubert Richards must be counted a follower of Gregor Smith when he says, 'But what actually happened to the tomb of Jesus? Was it miraculously emptied, or is it possible that archaeologists will one day find the remains of Jesus still there? Scholars agree that the answer to this question would make no difference to the resurrection itself....' (*op. cit.* page 109). It is obvious that Richards' use of 'scholars' is tendentious.

¹⁵ F. Kerr, 'Easter and Exegesis', page 111f.