



Catechism Commentary 17

Christians believe that the empty tomb, the eleven appearances of Jesus, and the dynamic origins of the Christian religion all point to one unavoidable conclusion: the resurrection of our Lord. Around A.D. 56, the Apostle to the Gentiles expressed what was already a well-established Christian belief, when he wrote: "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 untimely born, he appeared also to me" (1 Cor 15:3-8).

St Paul maintained that the Holy Spirit, the divine power that raised Jesus from the dead, was the same power that believers experience in their lives. That is why he stated, "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know . . . God's incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead" (Eph 1:18-20).

Down through the centuries, however, many arguments have been put forward in order to discredit this foundational belief. We will briefly assess five of them.

Firstly, in early Christian times and again in the 18th century, it was argued that the empty tomb could be explained by the fact that some of the disciples had stolen Jesus' corpse and lied about his appearances. Suffice it to say that this theory has been rejected by all reputable scripture scholars. While it could be argued that the apostles were deluded, there is no evidence whatever to suggest that they were liars.

Secondly, others have suggested that Jesus didn't really die on Good Friday. When he was taken down from the cross, he was merely unconscious. Later he revived, escaped from the tomb, and tried to convince the disciples that he had risen from the dead. Again, this is a very unlikely scenario. Besides suggesting that Jesus was a con man, it would have been impossible for him to have survived the physical hardship involved in being scourged and crucified. Surely, the lance, which was plunged into his heart, would have killed him if he wasn't already dead.

Thirdly, some critics, such as Irish scholar Dominic Crossan, maintain that when Jesus died the disciples continued to be animated and motivated by his spirit which they had absorbed during his public ministry. This they projected outwardly in the form of dreams, visions, or wishful thinking. In our psychological age, this argument appeals to many people. However, it is not very convincing. While it is possible that a person or a group might have one such hallucination, it stretches credulity to think that many people in different situations would have had similar illusory experiences. In any case they do not explain the phenomenon of the empty tomb

Fourthly, in the 20th century many sceptics argued that rather than being about an objective event, the resurrection accounts constituted a myth which grew out of the life and death of Jesus. Scholars, such as James Frazer, Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell have indicated how the resurrection accounts have parallels in the stories of the death and re-birth of heroes in other cultures. For example, Osiris, Tammuz, Orpheus and Balder were either of divine or semi-divine birth. They flourished, were killed and afterwards reborn. While these myths point to and find their fulfilment in the *fact* of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, it doesn't make sense to say that within a few short years after his death, the early Christians had manufactured their own distinctive resurrection myth. As Anglican theologian John Macquarrie has written, "Myth is usually characterized by a remoteness in time and space... as having taken place long ago." By contrast the Gospels concern "an event that had a particularly definite location in Palestine... under Pontius Pilate, only a generation or so before the New Testament account of these happenings."

Fifthly, there are others who reinterpret the resurrection of Jesus by saying that, while his soul survived death, his body decayed in a grave like anyone else. For instance, Episcopal bishop, John Spong wrote: "Jesus... was... placed into a common grave and covered over...in a very short time only some unmarked bones remained. Even the bones were gone before too long. Nature rather efficiently reclaims its own resources." The notion that Jesus was merely resurrected in a spiritual sense, while his body lay in the grave, is a characteristically modern one. First century Jewish thinking would never have accepted such a view. Furthermore, it is not how Jesus' resurrection was proclaimed in the earliest accounts. It would have been impossible for resurrection claims to be accepted if it was known that there was a tomb somewhere containing the corpse of Jesus. It is likely that those who argue for a spiritual resurrection only, are influenced by a rationalist, scientific worldview that assumes that miracles of any kind, especially the resurrection, are not possible.