Chapter Five: The Early Jesus Movement

Resurrection of Christ
(1510-15)
[Isenheimer Altarpiece]
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The resurrection of Jesus has been the central affirmation of Christian faith since at least the proclamation of Paul to the people of Corinth: "If Christ is not raised, your faith is in vain" (1 Cor 15:17).

However, the precise origin and understanding of resurrection-faith is difficult to explain. Is the resurrection a physical, bodily, historical event in the manner of other earthly events? Or is it something else again?

Unlike the crucifixion, the resurrection has not been significant in the history of western art. There is good reason for this insofar as nobody actually saw the resurrection! Among exceptions to this general reluctance of artists in depicting the resurrection is this painting. It is a Renaissance work of a German artist in the early years of the Protestant Reformation.

It depicts Christ in glorious colour rising from the tomb; the light is blinding to the guards who fall down in shock and dismay as one might do in a flash of brilliant sunlight. There is clear reference here to the resurrection narratives. There may also be an oblique reference to the faith of the Reformers who were being exposed to the light of the Reformation-truth of Christ.
Introduction

If we can speak of a Jesus-movement during Jesus' earthly life and ministry, that movement came to an abrupt end with the crucifixion. However, as history records, Jesus' death was not the last word. Something happened in the lives of Jesus' disciples resulting in the formation of a new Jesus-movement which has endured till this day. It is equally true that, in the minds of the disciples, something happened to Jesus after his death which explains their remarkable and completely unexpected transformation.

If we are to achieve some understanding of how Christian faith arose from the grave of Jesus, we need to investigate the Easter experiences and how it was that the disciples now experienced Jesus as 'risen from
the dead'. In turn, this will lead to a discussion of how the first Christians interpreted Jesus as Christ and Lord (that is, the New Testament christological process). We will also look at some of the implications of this process for the early followers of Jesus.

**Easter experiences**

It is worth stating at the outset that nobody saw—nor, for that matter, claimed to see—the resurrection of Jesus. However, what the New Testament does present to us are accounts of Jesus 'appearing' to the disciples. In the earliest account we have (1 Cor.15:3-8), Paul tells us that Christ died for our sins, was buried, rose on the third day, and then 'appeared' to Cephas, the twelve, to more than five hundred, to James, and finally to Paul himself. Other than this, Paul shows little interest in historical detail.

At first it seems that the gospel accounts are attempts to corroborate Paul's evidence with historical data. However, there is such diversity, even contradiction, in these stories of what happened following the death and burial of Jesus, that we are left with more questions than answers. In fact, the original Markan account has no appearance stories; in Matthew, Jesus appears to the disciples in Galilee after his ascension; in Luke, the appearances occur on the same day in Jerusalem prior to the ascension; in John, the story is different again. Biblical scholars generally agree that these and the many other discrepancies in the
Easter stories point to the fact that we are dealing with sophisticated literary or theological writings rather than attempts to write history.

Again, we are confronted with the same problem that we encountered in our attempt to sketch an historical portrait of Jesus of Nazareth. The gospels are less concerned with history (what happened) than with theology (how is God revealed to us in what happened). When it comes to accounting for the historicity of the Easter experiences, we have the further difficulty of explaining a unique happening that is beyond the world of ordinary experience. The most we can do is to profile the various gospel understandings of how Jesus continued to live beyond death and how the disciples experienced his transformed presence.

Orthodox Jewish belief in the afterlife included belief in the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body at the end of time. However, Jewish belief did not countenance the idea of an individual resurrection prior to the end of the world. In this respect it is significant that there were other ways of explaining what happened to Jesus. Apart from
resurrection symbolism, early Christians spoke of Jesus the heavenly high priest, the exalted one now living in glory, the coming Lord of the future, holy wisdom. These were all ways of expressing belief in the new risen reality of Jesus that surpassed ordinary Jewish resurrection faith.

In other words, by itself, Jewish resurrection symbolism was not an adequate way of explaining what happened to Jesus after his death. What the first believers struggled to express was that something completely strange and unexpected had happened to Jesus. It was something like what orthodox Jews imagined happening for virtuous people at the end of time except that, in Jesus' case, it had already occurred. In time, Christian belief in what happened to Jesus came to be expressed as God raising him from death. However, in the context of Jesus' time, this was a totally unexpected turn of events. It also meant that the understanding of resurrection belief took on new and expanded meaning for Jesus' disciples.

**Transformation of Jesus**

Whatever the discrepancies in historical detail, the gospels witness to Jesus' transforming experience enabling him to live beyond death. The accounts are also clear in carefully distinguishing this transformation of Jesus from bodily resuscitation (such as Jesus' raising of Lazarus). Jesus is new and different. He does not seem bound by time and space. Rather, he is depicted as living a new mode of existence with God which alters the way that he is present to the world.
Mark says that 'he appeared in another form' (16:12). The picture we are given of the transformed Jesus is often like a spirit who 'comes' and 'goes' in a manner impossible for ordinary, earthly beings (Lk.24:31; Jn.20:19, 26). In many of the appearance stories, Jesus is not immediately recognizable.

Still, the language used to describe the transformed Jesus emphasizes his continuity with the earthly Jesus. In John, Jesus invites his disciples to see and touch him (20:20-27); in Luke, Jesus walks, talks and eats (24:39). It is this emphasis on the physicality of the risen Jesus that leaves the disciples with no doubt--despite Thomas' initial reluctance to believe--that the risen Lord is the same Jesus who was crucified and buried. Paul simply proclaims Jesus to be the crucified-and-risen one.

For the New Testament, then, the Easter event represents the new, profound and totally unexpected revelation that Jesus has survived death and been transformed by God into a new mode of being. It is first and foremost an event that happens to Jesus himself and for which there is no precedent. No wonder that the New Testament strains to provide a linguistic and conceptual framework adequate for communicating this kerygma or good news. Inevitably, its language must be imaginative and symbolic as it seeks to convey a reality that represents a breakthrough in human and religious consciousness.

For us, as for the disciples themselves, this breakthrough in the understanding of what happened to Jesus beyond death remains in the
realm of mystery. This side of death, we can but glimpse the full reality of what is intended by this resurrection, ascension and glorification language. Nonetheless, what is implied by the Easter experience is not mythological talk. As Paul is at pains to explain: 'If Christ was not raised, your faith is in vain' (1 Cor.15:17). Matthew's resurrection narrative is also designed to counter those who would reduce the resurrection to the level of fable. And the empty tomb tradition, common to all the gospels, witnesses to the disciples' belief that Jesus is indeed 'risen' from the dead.

Our own ability to depth the reality of the transformed mystery of Christ is, of course, dependant on own belief and value system. For example, it would make very little sense to an atheist. However, for one who trusts in the divine mystery and believes that we can experience the graciousness of God in this life, there is already some sense or foretaste of resurrected life. Evidently, the earthly Jesus experienced the reality of the divine mystery in a profound way to the point of trusting his heavenly Father in the face of inhuman suffering and violent death. It is against this background that God's vindication of Jesus in death needs to be situated.

The vindication, transformation or resurrection of Jesus is then a surprise and a grace; but it affirms rather than violates our deepest human and religious aspirations.

*In some real sense, Jesus still 'lives' with God, with a God who is present within the world and human history, gifting them with*
life. God, world and humanity can never be separated. Now, if we trust that Jesus still 'lives' with the Divine Mystery, then we can also trust that he still 'lives' with us. If you like, Jesus has made the final death-resurrection passage from egocentricity to other-centeredness. He is still with us, but in God's way: as a risen power of justice, love and peace.¹

Consequently, Jesus' new mode of existence with God transforms rather than severs his relationship to the world and human history. Whereas the life and ministry of the earthly Jesus were confined to a few short years in first century Palestine, the life of the risen Jesus is able to transform the whole universe with justice, love, peace--and the other fruits of the Holy Spirit. In this way, Jesus' real earthly absence is at the same time a new heavenly presence within the world and human history.

Although there is little we can say with clarity regarding Jesus' new mode of existence with God, the world and ourselves, we know from the first believers that it was first and foremost a Spirit-filled experience--both for Jesus and for them. They knew Jesus to be alive with God and still present in the world because the Spirit of Jesus was communicated to them. We now move to a discussion of this other dimension of the Easter event wherein the transformation of Jesus is communicated to the disciples.

Transformation of disciples

It is the firmly held belief of the early Church that the risen Jesus manifested himself to the disciples through a number of actual, historical, revelatory encounters. These encounters are normally—although not always—spoken of as 'apparitions' or 'appearances' of the risen Jesus.

In an attempt to describe these encounters, Paul uses the Greek verb 'he appeared' (ophthe) which is linked to the Hebrew notion of theophany with its two-fold meaning: an objective, real initiative on the part of God to be made known, and; a subjective response in faith on behalf of those undergoing this religious experience. Both dimensions are strongly emphasized in the post-resurrection encounter narratives.

As recorded in the New Testament, the encounters are presented according to a fairly stable pattern: the disciples are despondent and afraid; Jesus' presence takes them by surprise; Jesus offers some form of greeting; the disciples recognise Jesus; a word of command or commission by Jesus concludes the encounter. The process could also be described in terms of the three-fold pattern we used to explore Jesus' parables: Advent - the death of Jesus is the last word leaving the disciples without hope or expectation; Reversal - Jesus who was crucified is now alive with them in a transformed state; Action - the disciples' own lives are transformed so that they now become fearless proclaimers of Jesus' victory over death.
The disciples understand themselves to be empowered by the new life that Jesus shares with God. The dramatic change which overtakes them—from despair and cowardice to faith and courage—can be described in terms of a religious conversion experience. Again, we need to stress that we are dealing with an objectively real moment of grace that springs from the divine initiative: Jesus is risen. Nonetheless, this experience of encounter with the risen Jesus does not violate the subjective disposition of the disciples. It is for this reason that only those 'with faith', that is, those who are open to the communication of the divine mystery in their lives, are the ones who are able to 'see' the risen Lord.

The description of these revelatory encounters ranges from a sense of fellowship and at-one-ment (Lk.24:13-25; Jn.21:1-14), to a new life of solidarity in the Spirit (Mt.28:16-20; Jn.20:22), and new experiences of peace and forgiveness (Jn.20:19-23). Such experiences correlate to our deepest yearnings for justice, love, peace, human fulfillment and the 'risen life'. On the one hand, they come as gifts of life and salvation. On the other, they cannot be imposed; they need to be responded to in freedom and love. This is equally true for the disciples who, in a number of texts, also struggle in freedom and love to recognize Jesus and experience the gifts he offers.

This transformation of the disciples' lives has a double-aspect: it enables them to overcome their fear and guilt at abandoning Jesus--the
experience of grace as forgiveness; and it empowers them to continue the 'work' of Jesus in his struggle against sin and injustice. Like Jesus himself, the disciples undergo something of a transforming death-resurrection passage from 'egocentricity' to 'other-centeredness'. For them, to experience the risen Jesus and his gifts of salvation is to be 'commissioned' by him to continue his saving work.

These encounters were not only moments of recognition of what Jesus positively is, was, and works for. They were also moments of liberation from what was opposed to him, and still is so opposed. They were freeing moments, moments of recognition of how Jesus acts to save us from oppression and sin.... The disciples were similarly impelled (to continue this liberating work of Jesus) as their commissioning indicates.²

The Easter experiences confirm what the disciples already experienced in a veiled way during Jesus' earthly life, namely, that he was God's special envoy of peace, love and justice. In their encounter with this same Jesus now experienced in a new way, the disciples' lives are transformed so that they become the new agents of God's liberative action for the kingdom. However, instead of speaking of the kingdom of God as Jesus had done, the disciples begin to focus their proclamation on Jesus himself.

Consequently, we can speak of Easter in terms of: the transformation of Jesus (from death to life); the transformation of the disciples (from

²Thompson, The Jesus Debate, 222f.
disbelief and fear to faith and courage); and the transformation of the message (from the kingdom to Jesus). The focal point for all three transformations is the resurrection and its manifestation to the disciples in their encounters with the risen Lord. These personal encounters, although communicated to us via symbol and metaphor, are real experiences of grace and salvation confirming God's unique presence in Jesus, a presence continuing beyond the grave and available to all who believe.

**From the risen Jesus to divine status**

Even the experience of the 'risen Jesus' does not automatically lead the first Christians to afford Jesus divine status. After all, these early Christians understood Jesus within the framework of strict Jewish monotheism (belief in the *one God*). Moreover, the earthly Jesus' self-understanding would seem to imply a relationship of intimacy rather than equality with God (the *Abba* relationship, for example, makes no claim to divine status). Nonetheless, the marvellous things that God had done through Jesus, both in his earthly existence and now in his risen life, inevitably lead the first disciples to speak of Jesus in a new and exalted manner. He is no ordinary human person but one in whom the divine mystery is uniquely manifest.

In fact, there are many New Testament Christologies that develop in the post-Easter attempt to explain the mystery of who Jesus was and is.
Such Christologies always reflect the cultural and religious concerns of particular communities. As well, they develop in a liturgical or confessional setting, that is, as expressions of people's new religious experience of God's saving presence in Jesus. In turn, these experiences are interpreted according to the known categories and familiar languages of the various communities. From the beginning, there is simply a pluralism of confessional, linguistic and cultural interpretations of what Jesus does and who he is.

The earliest post-Easter communities tended to use a two-stage Christology to distinguish the earthly and the risen Jesus. The earthly Jesus is described in prophetic-biblical categories such as 'servant', 'holy' or 'righteous' one and, perhaps, the eschatological, Moses-like prophet. Other Christological titles--such as Son of God, Christ (Christos) and Lord (Kyrios) --, are reserved for the risen Jesus who is experienced as surviving death, taken into glory, and now waiting to return. These titles and descriptions of the risen Jesus recognise that he exercises some special kind of kingly, royal or divine authority.

It is important to realise that, in the early Palestinian communities, the experience of the risen Jesus is interpreted according to Jewish apocalyptic belief. This means that the emphasis is on the future, early return of Jesus, the 'heavenly Son of Man', who will come in power and
Glory. This resurrection-parousia Christology is expressed liturgically in the maranatha-prayer: 'Come Lord Jesus'. However, as Christian communities are confronted with the delay in Jesus' return, the focus shifts from the future to the present.

Greek-speaking Jewish Christians soon concentrate their liturgy on the present exaltation of the risen Jesus: 'Jesus is Lord'. The titles attributed to Jesus—including Christ, Lord and Son of God—take on a developed understanding of Jesus' present, mediating role between God and the world. Jesus will not only return at the end of time to judge the world, but is already now exercising a saving presence in the world. A further development is that these Christological titles, which are originally reserved for Jesus' post-Easter existence, are now projected back onto Jesus' earthly life. For example, the historical Jesus is recognised to be the 'messiah' for whom the Jews had been waiting; Paul says that he dies as Christos (1 Cor.15:3); and then 'Christ' simply becomes part of Jesus' proper name throughout his whole career (Rom.1:8).

Greek thinking is also evident in the development of a three-stage Christology which becomes highly developed in the communities of Greek Christians. This Christology is evident in the prologue of John's gospel (1:1-14) where Jesus Christ is identified as: the pre-existent Word of God through whom all creation is brought into existence; the Word who became flesh in the human, historical Jesus through the miracle of the incarnation; and the reigning Lord of post-Easter glory. This three-stage Word-Christology of
John--pre-existence, incarnation and exaltation--is mirrored in the much earlier cosmic-Christology of the Pauline hymns (Phil.2:6-11; Col.1:15-20). These high Christologies tend to read the entire cosmos--from its conception till its completion--in terms of the mediating role of Jesus who is Christ and Lord as well as 'image', 'word', or 'wisdom' of God.

These Christologies also tend to push the exaltation of Jesus into his historical life and ministry. This is clearly the case with the entire gospel of John as with the infancy narratives, baptismal accounts and transfiguration scenes in the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke). These Christologies see beyond what the disciples experienced of Jesus during his earthly existence and even beyond what Jesus saw about himself. Nonetheless, these developments should not be seen as falsifying the historical Jesus, but as deepening the inner-reality of Jesus' earthly identity in the light of the Easter experiences. They witness to the early church's belief that the earthly and risen Jesus are not two, but one and the same reality.

Eventually, if cautiously, the New Testament comes to acknowledge Jesus' divine status in an unambiguous manner to the point of saying that Jesus is Theos in the sense of God's equal (Jn.1; Jn.20; Heb.1:8-10). Precisely how this is compatible with monotheistic belief is left to subsequent generations to interpret. However, before embarking on a discussion of the development of Christology in the early Christian centuries, we need to acknowledge that the question of Jesus' divine status should not override our entire interpretation of the early Jesus' movement. In some
ways, this movement from lower to higher Christological titles to designate Jesus was an ambiguous phenomenon precisely because it tended to overshadow the human side of the Christ mystery. This was, in fact, a problem for the early Jesus movement itself.

The crucified and risen One

Over-concentration on the exalted nature of Jesus' divine status runs the risk of diminishing the full power of the message that Jesus preached. As we have seen, this was the liberating message of the kingdom-community of God, a kingdom-community of those called to suffer and struggle to make Jesus' vision of justice, love and peace a reality in the world where oppression, injustice and evil so often reign. It is Paul who appreciates this most keenly in his Christology of the crucified and risen one. This is also the Christology of many of the earliest Christian communities.

For Paul, the Easter event does not annul Jesus' earthly struggle against the forces of evil that led to his violent, bloody death. In fact, the opposite is the case: it is precisely the crucified Jesus who reigns as Lord. The resurrection continues and confirms the life of the Cross. Jesus' messiahship and lordship are always read in terms of Paul's servant Christology: Jesus lives his life for others and calls them into mutual servantship with him. This is the critical edge to Paul's liberating, radical Christology: it is only in self-giving love through the cross of suffering on behalf of others that the kingdom of God's universal love can arrive.
In keeping alive the two-fold reality of Jesus crucified and risen, Paul retains the acute tension in Jesus' message between the 'already' and the 'not yet' of the kingdom. He also berates the Corinthians for identifying the kingdom with displays of divine power instead of focussing their concerns on building a community of love and service. Paul believes that, in Jesus, God has already begun the kingdom of justice and peace. However, he also recognises the unfortunate tendency in certain sections of the Jesus-movement to act as if Jesus had completed the work. In fact, the very reason for the Jesus-movement is to carry on the work which Jesus has begun.

The loss of the liberating, critical edge of the Jesus-movement is both a concern for Paul and a trap into which he himself sometimes falls. At least there is evidence to suggest that Paul's attitude to women, for example, is not entirely consistent with his love Christology that opposes all forms of oppression and injustice. In fact, earlier letters account for Paul's commitment to women's equal freedom and dignity with men: women are Paul's co-workers, not subordinates (Rom.16:6,12); they are leaders of community-churches (Phlm.2; 1 Cor.16:19); Junia is even called an 'apostle' by Paul (Rom.16:7); and Phoebe is a 'deacon' for the whole church (Rom.16:1f.).

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These texts contrast most starkly with Paul's admonitions to women (1 Corinthians 11:2-26; 14:33-36) where they are asked to play a very subsidiary role to men in society at large as in the Christian assembly.

Here, it seems, Paul is more concerned with making the Christian movement acceptable to the cultural standards of the wider world. It is a trap into which the Christian church would often fall. Of course, it is difficult for any movement to retain the purity and freshness of its beginnings. In order to endure, movements need laws and structures; they need to be institutionalized. We have seen enough to recognise that this process already begins in the time of the New Testament writings and that part of the price that is paid is the loss of the radical, liberating edge which characterized the Jesus-movement in its origins.

As we move to a review of historical and contemporary understandings of the Jesus movement and the Christ mystery, we need to keep alive the memory of the historical Jesus--the one who preaches the kingdom and suffers and dies--as well as the risen Christ of glory who is proclaimed in Easter faith. The scandal of the Cross and the wonder of the resurrection are two inseparable dimensions of the one mystery of Jesus (the) Christ.
Further Reading

Brennan Hill, Jesus the Christ: Contemporary Perspectives, Rev. ed. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2004), Ch.7; pp. 124-139.

