

John 20:19-31

The author of the Fourth Gospel is a Palestinian Jew, attracted to the Merkabah mysticism of the Jews. He has given us four stories to explain the resurrection. So far, he has had the risen Jesus appear to the eyes of Mary Magdalene, who at first mistakes him for a gardener and then is told that she cannot cling to him because he is “ascending to the Father”. This vision was certainly not designed to convey a physical resuscitation.

In the second episode, we saw Peter and the “disciple whom Jesus loved”, yet there is still no body and no appearance of the risen Christ. The author of this gospel was Jewish, so he knew the Jewish scriptures, which related narratives of Jewish heroes so beloved by God that they passed from life into the oneness of God without enduring the pain and decay of death. There was Enoch who walked with God who took him. Then Moses, who like Enoch was taken by God at his death. Elijah left in a chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire as a whirlwind propelled him into the presence of God. These Jewish hero stories were very familiar to the readers of the synoptic traditions.

In the synoptic gospels, when Jesus is transfigured, Moses and Elijah appear out of heaven to talk to him, having preceded him into the life of God. When Luke tells the story of Jesus’ ascension, he clearly builds his narrative on the story of Elijah’s ascension. The author of this Gospel, who had a mystical bent, viewed resurrection in light of these Jewish traditions. To understand physical resurrection

as the resuscitation of a deceased body back into life of the world would have been quite foreign to him. Resurrection was an experience whose reality could not be questioned, and he approached it in a spirit of expectancy and wonder.

The second fallacy, into which John believed the Christian tradition had fallen, was the anticipation of what came to be called the “second coming” of Jesus. This idea grew in early Christian thought when the death and resurrection of Jesus had not ushered in the kingdom of God as his followers anticipated. The credibility of the Easter claim depended on a “second coming”, the return of Jesus from heaven to usher in that kingdom and to bring human history to a close. The early Christians developed a prayer around this theme that was used so frequently and so regularly that it came to be known as “the Lord’s Prayer”, though Jesus himself neither uttered it nor commanded it to be recited. It is a prayer for the kingdom of God to come, since it had not dawned with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The delay and return of Jesus was a major concern by the turn of the first century when John’s gospel was completed. Jesus’ contemporaries had all passed away. So, was the “second coming” that had been built so deeply into Christian expectations simply a mistake? Or had the Jesus story been rather significantly misunderstood? That was the dilemma for Christians at the time. If the Jesus story had been misunderstood, how could John reinterpret resurrection so as to correct the earlier impression?

With the background from Jewish scriptures and the faith heroes escaping

death, along with the insights of the Jewish mystical tradition, the setting for the third resurrection story is set. It is the evening of the first day of the week, the same day that Mary Magdalene learned she could not cling to the physical presence of Jesus and the same day that Peter and the “beloved disciple” confronted the reality that the grave could not contain Jesus. Yet in this third episode with the gathered disciples, nothing from either of the two earlier resurrection episodes appears to have been communicated to the followers.

John’s four resurrection stories are unrelated, with each story communicating a distinct aspect of the resurrection. In this third scenario, Thomas is not present. Jesus who appears is clearly not physical - he entered a room in which the doors were locked “for fear of the Jews”. Neither the appearance to Magdalene, nor the belief that had been born in the “beloved disciple” at the empty tomb appears to have made an impact on any member of the disciple band. Jesus simply appears mysteriously in their midst, not bothering to open the locked doors.

First he pronounces peace: “Peace be upon you.” It is the peace of the one who has overcome the world. John then removes all doubt that what they are seeing is the one who was crucified. Jesus shows them his hands bearing the print of the nails and his side which was pierced by a spear. Then Jesus commissions them: “As the father has sent me, even so I send you.” This resurrection experience is not designed to convince the disciples that Jesus has been raised; it is intended to convince them that they have a responsibility to fulfill: They are the bearers of the resurrected life that must be shared with the world.

Having commissioned the disciples, Jesus “breathed on them” and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit.” It was Pentecost, as the author of the Fourth Gospel had come to understand it. The community was to be the source of life. Its members had the power to bind the people or to unbind the people. They could offer life in all of its fullness, but those who were still hiding in their darkness - those who still were hiding behind their defensive barriers - would never be able to receive that life. Our survival instinct must be separated from our being and then overcome before we can enter the oneness of God and give our lives away in love to others. Our survival needs represent the final boundary on our limitless humanity; escaping that boundary is what it means to be “born of the spirit.”

The second coming of Jesus, was not something that would arrive in time, whether a short time or a long time. And it would not come in space which is an external place that can be measured. The second coming is the birth of all those who choose the light and enter into the mystical source of oneness with God. It is a step beyond survival into the experience of the spiritual freedom that issues eternal life. God had initiated human life by breathing into Adam the breath of life. So now Jesus, the human life in which the will of God was lived out, and through whom the creating word of God was spoken, would breathe on the disciples to call them into the new dimension of life he came to bring.

It was the new creation. To be “born of the spirit” was to be born into the meaning and oneness of God. It was an inner experience, not an outer one. It was

to enter in a new way what it means to be human. The spirit will guide those in whom it resides into all truth.

The resurrection is not the appearance of a physical apparition. It is the experience of the indwelling life of God in the form of the spirit. It comes as the life-giving breath of God flows to the disciples from Jesus, who has passed from death into life because he could give his life away in love for others. He could live the life of God. He could share in the oneness of God. He could open the door for us all to step into the reality of God. The glorification of Jesus was in the crucifixion; the return of Jesus was in the imparting of the spirit on Easter evening. From Friday to Sunday is that "little while" which Jesus referred to in his farewell discourse with his disciples, when he promised to return in "a little while". There is to be no further waiting for the second coming.

That is what resurrection means for John, and it is not something that occurred just in the life of Jesus; it occurs or it can occur in each of us. The Christian life is not about believing creeds and being obedient to divine rules; it is about living, loving and being. Resurrection comes when we are freed to give our lives away, freed to love beyond the boundaries of our fears, freed not only to be ourselves, but to empower all others to be themselves in the full, rich variety of our multifaceted humanity. Here, prejudice dies. Here, wholeness is tasted. Here, resurrection becomes real.

With the Fourth Gospel's last resurrection story, John wraps the narrative

around a character that he has created. In Mark, Thomas is one of the twelve chosen disciples. Matthew and Luke simply include him in a list of names of the disciples. "Doubting Thomas" is a unique creation.

At some point in Christian history, the gospel of Thomas appeared. It was not a book that existed to be read or quoted, but a book that other writers, whose works have been preserved, had made references to. The gospel of Thomas was uncovered in the caves at Nag Hammadi in 1945 - along with other writings. It is a relatively brief 114-verse collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. Some of those Jesus sayings are similar to those recorded in the synoptic gospels. It has no miracle stories, no birth, death, nor Easter narratives. It presents more of an Eastern mystical understanding of the nature of Jesus. It is not dogmatic or creedal and was not used in theological battles that marked the first three hundred years of Christian history. It predates the canonical gospels and it has been argued that the Fourth Gospel was written to contradict the gospel of Thomas. Perhaps that is why John turned him into "Doubting Thomas".

Thomas, in the resurrection story, is treated somewhat disparagingly. He is made to stand out in his disbelief from all the other disciples. He does not accept their witness to an experience which he apparently has not had. He wants a personal experience, a physical demonstration. Resurrection cannot be hearsay for him. He will come to belief in Jesus only when he is able to see the evidence for himself. He insists on touching the wounds. Thomas is demanding a sign.

In this characterization, Thomas becomes representative of another group, the doubters, in the audience of the Fourth Gospel. Once again we experience the tension of that gospel, blending together the Jesus story with the story of the Johannine community of followers, who were, when this gospel was written, the subjects of both controversy and persecution. If resurrection were to be understood as the physical resuscitation of a three-days-deceased body, it was as hard for people in the first century to believe as it is for people of the twenty-first century. Thomas was a “show me” kind of man. Give me the proof. Produce the evidence. You said that you have seen him alive, Thomas says, well I haven’t, and until I see him with my own eyes I will not believe. The Johannine community certainly knew people like Thomas, so John put those skeptics into his story using Thomas as a symbol.

Thomas was not present when Jesus first appeared to the disciples. So, John simply rewinds the script and repeats the previous experience almost verbatim. This episode is a rerun, but this time with Thomas. This second appearance occurs eight days later - the first day of the second week. The scene is exactly the same. The doors are shut, secured, and locked against the darkness of night and all the fears that darkness brings. The light of Jesus that will hurl back the darkness is a familiar Johannine theme. Shut doors are no barrier against his presence. Physicality does not appear to be an issue here. In both episodes we are told, “Jesus came and stood among them”; in both stories he says, “Peace be with you.”

Thomas is brought front and centre in this second episode. In the first scenario, Jesus showed the disciples his hands and side. Now Thomas will have the same opportunity for verification. Jesus says: "Put your finger here and see my hands, and put out your hand and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas does neither suggested action. Instead he utters the most overt affirmation of John's Jesus in this gospel. You are, Thomas exclaims: "my Lord and my God". You are the messiah sent from God. In Johannine terms, the messenger is of the same essence as the one who did the sending. Thomas' confession is, in effect: "I have seen God in the presence of Jesus; I have seen the word made flesh and dwelling among us." Thomas has come to understand that when we see Jesus, we see God.

Then John has Jesus clarify to the Thomases in the Johannine community and their descendants throughout history the correct understanding of the resurrection. First Jesus asks Thomas this question: "Have you believed because you have seen me?" then he adds the words for which this story was created: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Blessed are those who are called into the Christ experience through the witness of others. Blessed are those who experience an expanded humanity that comes through those who were themselves examples of that new human consciousness.

The disciples of Jesus will be recognized, Jesus said previously, by the love they have to give and by the freedom they achieve - freedom that will enable them

to give their lives away in love to others. The life and love we encounter in one another and in the human Jesus is the life and love on display in the crucified one. His image bears the scars of the life he lived, the freedom he experienced, the fact that his glorification claim came not in his triumph, but in his death, not in resurrected power, but in his ability always to give life and love even as his own life was being ripped from him.

That is John's Christ. That is what Thomas eventually sees. The cross is the final sign in this gospel that points beyond itself to its ultimate meaning. Thomas finally reads the sign properly. The crucified one is the presence of God among us. He is the God who is the source of life, and his call to us is to live fully.

John closes his gospel with words that make certain that this point is clear: *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples that are not in this book; but these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that believing you might have life in his name."*

To have life - not to become religious, not to achieve moral purity, not to win the contest to gain doctrinal orthodoxy, but to have life - *that* is the function of the Christ. It is to bring us to the experience of living in which we pass into new dimensions of life and cross, and cross the boundaries of fear that separate us from one another and from ourselves. That we "might have life and have it abundantly" -

that is what Jesus is about; that is what Jesus brings. To be Christian is not to *believe* that message, but to *live* that message. The Fourth Gospel leaves us with the spirit that empowers us to be the body of Christ doing the work of Christ in this and in every generation.

Amen.