

“Appeared—Breakfast in Galilee”

John 20:19–29; John 21:1–14

The true story

There are various resurrection accounts in the gospels. They are neither systematic nor neatly arranged. The writers simply tell us what happened, what the disciples saw and heard, with no attempt at any theoretical frameworks as to what happened. Here it is, they say. He walked, he ate, he cooked, he appeared inside locked rooms and so on. Jesus was resurrected. That’s the story, the true story.

The truth of doubt

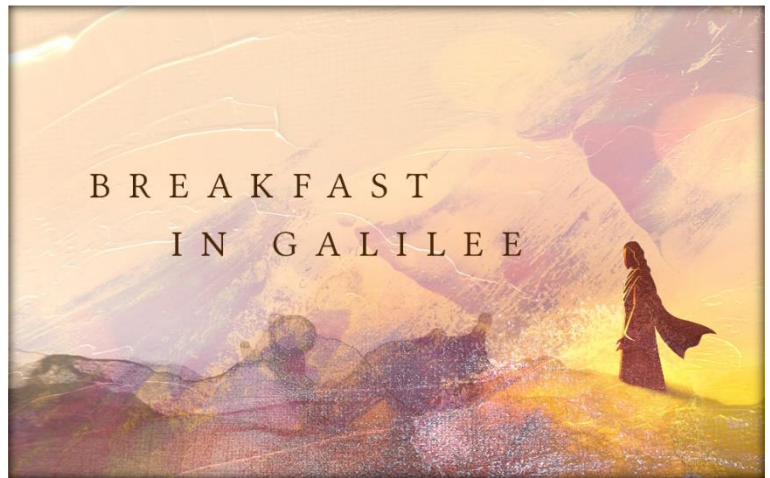
Yes, Thomas had doubts. Poor guy got the label “Doubting Thomas.” Big deal. We all have doubts. We are doubt-producing machines. And like Thomas, our doubts are reasonable. Think about it. We claim that 2,000 years ago a Galilean Jew died and was then resurrected to a newly embodied life. Not a ghost. Not resuscitated. But living anew, bodily, on the other side of death, never to look back. And we even claim that the same will be true for us all one day.

As hard as it might seem to believe such claims, when it comes to spiritual and religious matters, it is really not so much that America is a nation of unbelievers; rather, we are a nation of halfbelievers, carrying around vague notions of our deeply felt spiritual hunger. Sometimes we believe more than we would like to admit. At other times, we prefer to deny any beliefs at all. One need only turn on the television or pick up the daily newspaper to find Americans awash in attempts to make sense of their spiritual desires. We are a nation in which a majority still selfidentify as Christian, though many are really more “Christian-ish” than anything else, as shown in rigorous studies of Christianity in America.

In part, I think this is because we live in a world that values scientific knowledge as the only “real” knowledge, rather than embracing science as a way of knowing, but not the only way. Too many people expect “proof” if they are to overcome their doubts. But outside of mathematics, I can’t really think of much that we can actually prove beyond all doubt. Science, the source of most of what we consider proven knowledge, is not really about proving anything. One of the things drummed into me in my education was the notion that a scientific hypothesis is never proven, only that many hypotheses have yet to be disproved. Modern science works because the visible universe is orderly and predictable, not because science proves things.

And so, with Thomas, we stand there before Jesus. Believe or not? Perhaps we are like the father of a young boy who cries out to Jesus, “*I believe; help my unbelief!*” (Mark 9:24).

A week before Thomas had scoffed at the idea of a resurrected Jesus, saying he’d have to touch the wounds for himself in order to believe (John 20:25). Now, he can touch the wounds for himself. Now he knows as well as he can ever know. And his response is all it could ever be: “*My Lord and my God!*”



GOD’S VINDICATION OF JESUS

It would be a mistake to see Jesus’ resurrection as merely the greatest of all miracles. The resurrection of Jesus was much more than a demonstration of God’s power. The resurrection was God’s vindication of Jesus.

On Friday afternoon, Jesus hung upon a Roman cross, a failed Messiah condemned as a traitor to Rome. To all appearances, Jesus’ life and ministry had met an ignoble end. He was despised and rejected and the world “held him of no account” (Isaiah 53:3).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to vindicate someone is to demonstrate that the person is “free of blame, criticism, or doubt.” Jesus’ crucifixion seemed to dash all hope that this man had been Israel’s Messiah. As far as the Jews were concerned, there could simply be no such thing as a crucified Messiah.

However, Jesus’ resurrection, this defeat of death, was a mind-blowing demonstration that the crucifixion was not all it had seemed. Rather than marking Jesus’ failure, the cross was actually the place of God’s victory over sin and death. Jesus had not been found guilty in God’s law court; he had been found innocent! And, because Jesus stands before God in our place, we too are vindicated, standing before God as forgiven, blameless people.

And his response is all it could

But even that would not be the end of the disciples' doubts. In one of the most perplexing moments in Scripture, Matthew tells us that Jesus met his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, from which he would return to his Father. He had been resurrected about six weeks before and had been with them numerous times since. Now, at this last meeting, Matthew tells us that, "When they saw him, they worshipped him but some doubted." What!! Some doubted?? How could that be? All the times they had been with him after his resurrection and yet some still doubted. What did they actually doubt? Matthew doesn't say. I guess it is enough to grasp that doubt is simply our way and must be vigilantly confronted.

Yet another story of the resurrected Jesus

What must the disciples have been thinking in those first weeks after Jesus' resurrection, as they head up to Galilee to tend to their affairs, to resume something of their former lives. Was Jesus resuscitated like Lazarus, and thus, would return to his old life, grow old, and then die a second time? No, Jesus is going to return to the Father; he told Mary Magdalene exactly that. Whatever that means, it surely isn't just going back to things as they were.

Ok, then, is he a ghost, a spirit of some kind? No, the Greeks had a word for that, *phantasma*, and it is never used in regard to the resurrected Jesus. Sure, the disciples had thought they were seeing a ghost, a *phantasma*, when they saw Jesus walking across the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:26), but they were wrong. He wasn't a ghost and then, and he isn't a ghost now that he has been resurrected (see Luke 24).

One morning in the weeks after Jesus' resurrection, Peter and some of the others head out for some morning fishing. After a while, they hear someone calling to them from the shore, telling them to try dropping their net on the right side of the boat. Figuring they have nothing to lose, they do so. At that moment, Peter realizes that Jesus is the man on the shore, so he put his clothes on (fishermen often fished naked if the weather was good), dove into the water and swam to shore. Meanwhile, the others pulled the net into the boat. It was teeming with fish, 153¹ in all, a miraculous catch by any measure.

When Peter gets to shore, Jesus is waiting. He is no ghost. He is no spirit. He has flesh and bones (Luke 24:39). He is a resurrected Jesus, but Jesus just the same.

And as he always had, Jesus still provides for their needs. Yes, Jesus enables them to get a big haul of fish, but when they come ashore they find that Jesus doesn't need their fish, he has already had some fish cooking over an open fire.

And they all sit down to share this meal together. Though John doesn't tell us explicitly that Jesus ate fish, we know from Luke's account that Jesus ate fish in front of the disciples on the first night he came to them after his resurrection. He ate the fish that night to help them see that he was still flesh and bone (Luke 24:36-43). Perhaps not exactly the same sort of flesh and bone, but still "flesh and bone," walking, talking, touching, and eating.

I'd bet that Jesus shares the meal with his disciples that morning. He had shared all their previous meals. You might wonder whether Jesus needs to eat to sustain his resurrected body, as you and I eat to sustain ours. Beats me. Perhaps Jesus eats now, not to sustain himself or because he needs to, but because he wants to enjoy the full bounty of God's goodness, including God's creation. (I take this as evidence that in the fullness of the kingdom of God, I'll be able to enjoy all the food I like without gaining weight...at least it's fun to think about!)

We picture the scene with our mind's eye, the bread and fish being passed around the fire, one disciple to another. We can't help but remember the time when Jesus fed thousands with a few loaves and fishes. Now, he feeds only a few. There is nothing miraculous or even remarkable about this meal, except for the fact that it was prepared by one who lay dead only a few weeks before.

As years pass

Twenty or so years later, Paul is writing to a Christian fellowship that he started in Corinth, Greece. They have given up their belief in Jesus' resurrection and, hence, their own. Paul can't bring them before the risen Christ to touch his wounds or meet him on a mountain, but he can offer his own testimony and that of others. Paul tells them that he, the other apostles, and more than five hundred men and women can personally attest to the resurrection of Jesus, for they saw Jesus with their own eyes. Indeed, many are still alive, he says, and could still testify to the truth of the resurrection claim.

¹ Much ink has been spilled over the centuries offering various explanations for the "153." Some think it must have some numerological meaning. For me, John says "153" because that is how many fish were caught in the net and John was there to see it. There is no real point in trying to read more into it. It is a miraculous catch. Enough said.

So it was then; so it is now. We want to believe. We want to trust Jesus completely. So we confront our doubts honestly. As part of a believing community, we strive to understand the Bible and the essential Christian beliefs. We want to make some sense of it all. We put the work in. We discuss. And, all the while, we pray, *"I believe; help my unbelief."*

How important is it that we believe in not only Jesus' resurrection, but our own?

In his Interpretation series commentary on 1 Corinthians 15, Richard Hays reflects on the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead, i.e., that not only has Jesus been resurrected, but that we too shall be resurrected just as Jesus was.

All Christian proclamation must be grounded in the resurrection. The faith stands or falls with this, as Paul insists throughout the chapter [1 Corinthians 15]. This has several crucial implications.

First, it means above all else that the gospel is a word of radical grace, for resurrection is one thing that we can neither produce nor control nor manipulate: our hope is exclusively in God's hands.

Second, it means that the faith is based on a particular event in human history, to which a definite circle of people gave testimony; the resurrection is not simply a symbol for the flowers coming up every spring or for the hope that springs eternal in the human heart. The Christian faith is grounded in the rising from the grave of Jesus Christ, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

Third, the foundational character of the resurrection means that eschatology is at the heart of the gospel. Because Christ is the first fruits, his resurrection points to the resurrection of all those who belong to him. That remains inescapably a future event. Thus, the effect of the resurrection of Christ is to turn our eyes to God's coming future.

Fourth, if we deny the resurrection, we will find ourselves turning inward and focusing on our own religious experience as the matter of central interest. That is what some of the Corinthians were doing, and it has also been the besetting temptation of Protestant theology since Schleiermacher. This inward turn can take the form of pietistic religion interested only in soulsaving, or it can take the form of "New Age" religion interested only in cultivating personal "spirituality." Either way it comes to much the same thing. The gospel of the resurrection of the dead, by contrast, forces us to take seriously that God is committed to the creation and that God has acted and will act in ways beyond our experience and external to our subjectivity.