

Luke 24:13-35

Introduction

Four years ago, in April 2022, it was reported that John Travolta had been spotted in a small town called Fakenham in Norfolk. One of the security guards at Morrisons, called Gary Middleton, spotted him in the biscuit aisle, and said he couldn't believe his eyes. He approached him and asked, 'Are you who I think you are?' John Travolta confirmed it and was happy to pose for a selfie. When Gary Middleton posted the photo on social media, it was met with disbelief. He was accused of photoshopping it or using a lookalike. But then other reports of sightings started appearing. One at Wetherspoons. Another at a local restaurant. And then another in a garden centre. It turned out that John Travolta was filming nearby and the sightings were all genuine. Disbelief turned to excitement.

It's that kind of thing that happened with the resurrection appearances of Jesus. Last week, we thought about the considerable historical evidence in support of the accounts of the resurrection. We saw that, based on the historical evidence, we can be confident that Jesus was crucified, died and was buried, and that on the third day the tomb was empty. But we noted that, initially at least, none of the disciples believed the women's report that Jesus had risen. Their words seemed to the disciples like nonsense. And perhaps you're still not persuaded yourself. Perhaps you still suspect that there might be another explanation for the empty tomb. Perhaps the women really *did* go to the wrong tomb. Or perhaps someone *had* moved the body, and, for some reason, it had never been discovered.

In one sense, it doesn't really matter. The fact that Jesus died by crucifixion is not seriously disputed by historians, the historical evidence is too compelling. So, if he was seen again *after* his death, alive and well, then regardless of what we make of the empty tomb, we must conclude that he has indeed risen from the grave. And that's exactly what we find in the New Testament. We've just read Luke's Gospel and the account of the risen Jesus appearing to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It's a famous story. As they walk along the road, Jesus joins them and asks what they're talking about. They tell him about their disappointment over the events of the crucifixion, and their confusion over the reports of the empty tomb. But then Jesus starts explaining it to them. They share a meal together. And the climax comes in verses 30 and 31. Look down again and see what it says: **When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?'** They return to Jerusalem to tell the apostles what had happened and they're told, **'It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon** (meaning Simon Peter).'

It's a wonderful story. And it's not the only one. The Gospels contain numerous accounts of the appearances of the risen Jesus to his disciples. And as with John Travolta in Fakenham, eventually, disbelief turns to wonder and, in Jesus' case, worship.

It's the appearances of the risen Jesus that we're thinking about this morning. If we have evidence to show that these accounts are historically reliable, then, whatever doubts we might have about the empty tomb, we have good grounds for believing in the historicity of the resurrection. And the first question we need to ask is this: Did the disciples themselves really claim to have seen the risen Jesus as Christians believe?

Did the disciples really claim to have seen the risen Jesus?

What we're asking is whether the accounts of the resurrection could be legend, a bit like stories of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table or Robin Hood and his Band of Merry Men?

Legend arises a bit like the game of Chinese Whispers. You start with a roomful of people and tell the first person a statement. They need to pass that statement on to someone else. That person needs to pass it on again. And so on, around the room. What normally happens is that, by the end, the statement has been so embellished and misquoted that it bears no resemblance to the one at the start. Something like that is said to have happened in the trenches during World War One. A message was sent through a chain of telephone operators and messengers. The original message was this: 'Send reinforcements, we're going to advance.' What the final recipient heard was this: 'Send three and fourpence, we're going to a dance.'

Could that have happened with the accounts of the resurrection? Could the claim that Jesus rose from the dead be nothing more than Chinese Whispers or legend? Could it have arisen out of nothing? We have very good reason to think not.

What we're looking for is historical evidence that the disciples claimed to have seen the risen Jesus. First, are the four Gospels themselves, which clearly record the appearances of the risen Jesus to the disciples.

Christians traditionally believe that the four Gospels come directly from the first disciples, the apostles. They were all written in the first century. And we can be confident that they have come to us in their original written form. We can be confident of that by looking at all the copies and fragments of New Testament writings that are known to exist.

First think of the *number* of manuscripts we have. There are more than 5,800 surviving manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. That's far more manuscripts than we have for any of the Classical Greek texts, like Homer's *Iliad* or the writings of Plato. It's been estimated that if you piled the surviving Greek manuscripts of the New Testament in a stack, they would reach nearly a third of a mile high. That's about one-and-a-half times taller than

the Eiffel Tower. It's so high you'd need an oxygen mask at the top. If you added the surviving copies in other languages, it would be over a mile high. That's staggering.

Then think of the *time gap* between the date the original text was written and the date of the earliest surviving manuscript. The difference is, again, staggering. For Homer's *Iliad*, the time gap between the original and the oldest surviving copy is about 400 years. For the Roman historian Tacitus, it's at least 750 years. For all other texts, it's about 1,000 years or more. For New Testament documents, it's as little as 25 years, and no more than 50.

We can be confident that we have the four Gospels in their original form. And they claim that the disciples really did see the risen Jesus. That's a good first step. And it's our first source of evidence.

However, not everyone accepts that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote the four gospels, or that their content came directly from the eyewitness accounts of the apostles. I *do* believe that, as do most Christians, but some people don't. And they claim that a process of Chinese Whispers could have taken place before they were written. So, do we have other sources of evidence? We do. And, the second source of evidence comes from the apostle Paul.

Paul wasn't one of the original disciples. He became a Christian a few years later. Although his writings appear in the Bible *alongside* theirs, his evidence is *independent* of theirs. We need to remember that although we now have all the New Testament writings in one volume, originally, they were composed and circulated separately. As historical evidence, Paul's writings provide an independent voice to that of the Twelve. He knew at least some of the apostles personally. And in his writings, he tells us that they preached about the appearances of the risen Jesus. We're looking for historical evidence that the disciples really did claim to have seen the risen Jesus. And Paul confirms it. That's good historical evidence.

But we don't just have to take Paul's word for it. We also have the testimony of the oral traditions of the church, which circulated before the New Testament was written. That's our third source of evidence.

We know that the news about Jesus circulated by word of mouth before it was written down. In the New Testament there are a number of passages in which those oral traditions seem to have been preserved. They include hymns, creeds and summaries of sermons, which were used to pass on important information in a form that could be memorised. To take an example, it seems very likely that a passage in 1 Corinthians 15 is one of them. Paul wrote this letter around about 55AD. Please turn to it with me in the church Bibles. You'll find it on page 1156. Look at verse 3.

Paul writes this: **For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the**

third day according to the Scriptures, and the he appeared to Cephas (which is another name for Simon Peter), and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Notice that Paul begins by saying, **...what I received I passed on to you...** What he seems to be quoting is a piece of oral tradition, perhaps an early creed. It's not something Paul had written himself. It was something he had received from others and passed on. That makes it another independent source of information; independent from the four Gospels and from the personal testimony of Paul himself. At the very least, it confirms the claim that the risen Jesus appeared to the first disciples.

But what's really interesting about this particular example is that there's good reason to think that Paul might have received it directly from Peter and James. Elsewhere, Paul tells us that he went up to Jerusalem three years after his conversion to get acquainted with Peter. He says that he stayed there for fifteen days and met James also. As one scholar points out, we can be sure they didn't spend those fifteen days just talking about the weather! They must surely have spoken about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus because that's at the heart of the gospel. And Peter and James must have spoken about their own experiences of seeing Jesus. It's inconceivable that they didn't. It seems very likely indeed that they passed on the details of those resurrection appearances, perhaps in the form of this creed itself, on that visit. And if they had said anything that contradicted this oral tradition, then Paul surely wouldn't have included it in his letter to the Corinthians. So, what we have here in 1 Corinthians 15 is a list of some of the most important appearances of the risen Lord Jesus after his crucifixion, which may even have come from Peter and James themselves. That's massive.

So then, we're looking for historical evidence that the first disciples really did claim to have seen the risen Jesus. Firstly, we have the Gospels themselves, which record the appearances of the risen Jesus to the disciples. Secondly, we have the writings of Paul, who knew the apostles and confirms that they claimed to have seen the risen Jesus. And, thirdly, we have the oral traditions of the church, some of which are preserved in the Bible, which also confirm the claim of the disciples to have seen the risen Jesus. One scholar has commented that, 'This is the sort of data that historians of antiquity drool over.'

And there's more. We have other writings outside of the Bible. We have the writings of Clement of Rome and Polycarp, who were leaders of the early church. They knew the apostles. They were taught and appointed by the apostles. They provide another source of evidence that is independent of the apostles. And they too confirm that the apostles themselves claimed to have seen the risen Lord.

When we add all this evidence together, it becomes overwhelming.

We can be confident that the apostles really did claim to have seen the risen Jesus because of the testimony of Paul, oral tradition, the writings of the early church leaders and the four Gospels themselves. It didn't arise through Chinese Whispers and it's not a legend. That conclusion is accepted almost unanimously by scholars. That's to say that most scholars accept that the apostles saw *something*. They had an experience of *something* that convinced them that Jesus had risen from the grave. But what exactly was it? What did they see? That's another bone of contention. Did the disciples really see *Jesus*, or could there be another explanation for their claims? That's got to be our next question. Did the disciples really see Jesus?

Did the disciples really see Jesus?

Could it be that the disciples were merely hallucinating when they thought they saw the risen Jesus?

Under certain conditions, when people experience extreme stress or trauma, they might hallucinate. They might think they see something that isn't there. Those hallucinations are often associated with grief. Think of a widow, who is convinced she has seen her dead husband. Might a 'grief hallucination' or something similar, explain the accounts of the resurrection appearances of Jesus? There are serious problems with that idea. One scholar has written, '...there are probably more refutations of this theory than any other.' Here are just three.

Firstly, psychologists have shown that hallucinations are a private matter. They are experienced by people individually. By their very nature, only one person can see a hallucination at a time. The same hallucination is not seen by a group of people.

US Navy SEALs are among the most elite fighting forces in the world, and their training is notoriously tough. To become a Navy SEAL a candidate must complete what's known as Hell Week. They must endure nearly six days of continuous physical exertion with less than four hours of total sleep. By the end, extreme sleep deprivation and hypothermia frequently trigger vivid hallucinations, most often, during an activity when the candidates are paddling a raft, as a team, surrounded by nothing but the ocean. During interviews afterwards, one candidate described thinking that he saw an octopus come out of the sea and wave at him. Others thought they saw trucks driving across the surface of the water straight towards them. Some have reported seeing a massive brick wall rising out of the water ahead of them. One thought he saw a fire-breathing dragon.

Those hallucinations occurred under extreme conditions. But even then, they were all fundamentally individual hallucinations. The group didn't all see the same thing. And that's significant because most of the accounts of the resurrection appearances of Jesus are to groups. We read in Luke's Gospel that Jesus appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Admittedly, that's a small group, a group of two, but it's a group, nonetheless. In

that list that Paul included in 1 Corinthians 15, the risen Jesus appeared to the Twelve, then a group of five hundred, and to James and all the apostles. Matthew, Mark and John also record group appearances. That simply doesn't fit with what we know about hallucinations, even if they were all experiencing extreme grief.

Secondly, a grief hallucination cannot account for the apostle Paul's experience of seeing the risen Jesus. He was certainly not grieving the death of Jesus. He hated Jesus. He believed him to be a false Messiah who was cursed by God. He had no desire at all to see Jesus or become his follower.

And thirdly, there are simply too many instances of Jesus appearing to his disciples for the hallucination idea to be credible. In the book of Acts, Luke tells us that he appeared to them over a period of forty days giving convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to men and women. Groups and individuals. Indoors and outdoors. It is inconceivable that all these appearances could be explained by hallucinations.

We can be confident that the disciples weren't hallucinating when they saw the risen Jesus. They weren't deluded. And the fact they all reported a physical appearance of Jesus and that they touched him and ate with him, also rules out his appearance as a ghost or vision. All the evidence points to the fact that they really did see the risen Jesus. Attempts to attribute the disciples' claims about the risen Jesus to hallucination and their poor state of mind are all unconvincing. And when we consider the profoundly changed lives of those who claimed to have seen the risen Jesus, the evidence that their accounts are genuine only gets stronger still. And that's what we'll be thinking about next week.

Conclusion

So far then, we've looked at reliable historical evidence to establish that Jesus really was crucified, died and was buried, and that on Easter morning the tomb was empty. We have further historical evidence that the disciples genuinely did claim to have seen the risen Jesus after his death. And we've ruled out theories that attribute the sightings of the risen Jesus to the disciples' state of mind, because those theories simply don't explain the facts. What we've got is very compelling evidence indeed that the resurrection of Jesus is a real event of history, and we've still got more evidence to come.

If you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, then you must deal with the evidence, because if it is true, the resurrection changes everything. It means that death isn't the end. There is a way through the grave. It's not enough to say, 'It doesn't sound right to me', or 'Things like the resurrection don't happen', or 'There must be some other explanation'. It's far too important just to dismiss it. You must deal with the evidence and follow it to its logical conclusion.

As Christians, we live each day with real and confident hope. That hope doesn't involve turning our brains off. We don't leave our brains at the door when we come into church.

The hope we have is rooted in the promises of God's word and the verifiable facts of history. We have hope in the face of death, because we know that the grave isn't the end. We have hope of a glorious future, because Jesus has conquered evil and will return to make all things new. We have hope to face daily trials and challenges, because we know that the risen Jesus is with us. Every day of the Christian life, we live with confident hope. And it's all because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

If you wouldn't yet call yourself a believer, please take seriously the claims of the disciples to have seen the risen Jesus. Come back and find out more. And ask God to open your eyes to see that it's true. And if you *are* a believer here this morning, let the *evidence* for the resurrection put a spring in your step and give you assurance to live confidently for Jesus in the week ahead.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, as we consider the evidence for the resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ, please deepen our faith and strengthen our resolve to live wholeheartedly for him. As we start a new week, please give us courage to speak confidently of his empty tomb and of the resurrection appearances to his disciples. Please help us to explain that our faith in Jesus is grounded in the facts of history. And please continue to draw others to faith in him through our witness. We ask it in his name and for his glory. Amen.