

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.

Associates: { E. C. HEGELER
MARY CARUS.

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THE PRINCE AND HIS PLAYMATE.

BY VAN DYCK.

[Charles II of England as a child.]

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS—AN HISTORICAL INQUIRY.

BY THE REV. JOSEPH C. ALLEN.

WHAT occurred, after the death of Jesus, to give rise to all the New Testament stories of His resurrection? The problem is tremendously complicated, and no answer has yet been given that has satisfied the majority of those students even that are able to put aside theological presuppositions and the real or supposed interests of religious faith.

In passing, it is worth while, however, to point out that the question of the immortality of the human soul is not at all involved in this historical problem. If a human body became alive again after it had been dead three days, that would have no bearing on the immortality of the soul. If such a thing should occur quite a number of times, it would be evidence that the immortality of the body is a possible achievement for the race. But if it occurred only once in human history, it would indicate only that the body concerned was different from that of all other men. In neither case would physical resurrection have any bearing on the immortality of the soul. Nor would it, in case the resurrection were a solitary occurrence in all history, prove anything as to the soul or personality of the possessor of such a body. The divinity or deity of Jesus is not proved by his rising from the grave, nor is it disproved if the resurrection be refuted. No rational foundation of Christian faith can be shaken by an unbiased enquiry into this historical problem. But it is complicated enough, when we have laid hopes and fears aside, and are ready to consider it in the dry light of reason, and with no purpose but to ascertain the actual fact.

These stories of the resurrection of Jesus are so abundant that we cannot brush them aside as baseless and inconsequential. They are, however, at the same time so strange, and so contradictory one of another, that we are compelled to regard most of them as far from accurate, and all of them as somewhat suspicious. Did the risen Jesus appear to the disciples in and near Jerusalem alone, as Luke declares; or (except for the appearance to the women near the grave) in Galilee alone, as Matthew states? Was the first appearance to Peter (I Cor. xv, 5, Lk. xxiv, 34, and by inference from Mk. xvi, 7), to Mary Magdalene alone (Jn. xx, 14), or to Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" (Matt. xxviii, 9)? Did He forbid to be touched before He ascended into heaven (Jn. xx, 17)? or, before this ascension had taken place, did He invite the disciples to handle Him (Lk. xxiv, 39; cf. 50 f.)? Again, when did Jesus ascend into heaven? Luke places this event on either the evening following the resurrection, or possibly very early the next morning. The same author, writing some years later, dates His ascension forty days after His rising from the tomb (Acts i, 3 f.). John's account of the appearance to Mary Magdalene, and of that to the eleven eight days later, imply that Jesus has ascended to heaven in the time intervening. No description of the ascension is given anywhere but in Luke and Acts, and the appendix to Mark. Mark's evidence is unfortunately lost, as we have not the genuine ending of his gospel. Neither Matthew nor Paul mentions the ascension. Paul appears to think of the resurrection and ascension as one and the same event, and to hold that Jesus either showed Himself from heaven, or came down to earth occasionally to meet His disciples.

Such glaring contradictions do not, however, indicate that the stories are baseless. On the contrary, they are evidence that something startling occurred, and that those who saw it were so moved by the experience that they were not able to remember and report it accurately.

And not only these contradictions, but the great volume of the testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, is evidence of some startling and definite fact or experience. Paul had spent fifteen days with Peter (Gal. i, 18). It is obviously, then, on Peter's authority that he gives a list of the appearances of the risen Jesus (I. Cor., xv.). Among these appearances, he states, was one to "above five hundred brethren at once, of whom," he says, "the greater part remain until now, but some are fallen asleep." We can hardly doubt that this particular statement of Paul is based on an actual experience of a

large number of disciples at some assemblage, or that the experience was of such a sort as to make them believe that they had either seen Jesus with the physical eye, or felt in the mind His real presence.

This story of the appearance to the five hundred was a part of the apostolic tradition. Why, then, is it not related in any of the Gospels? On the other hand, why is Paul silent about the empty tomb, the appearance to Mary Magdalene, the exhibition by Jesus of His wounds and His inviting the disciples to touch Him, and lastly His eating and talking with them? Here is indicated a profound difference of view between Paul and the evangelists. To him the resurrection was spiritual—not a reanimation of the body. Jesus, he says, “was seen” (ὡφ η I. Cor. xv, 5) by Peter and others, and lastly by himself. The word emphasizes the mental element, and may be used with especial fitness of visions. It was, in fact, in a vision that Paul had seen Jesus, and he evidently did not think it necessary to distinguish between this vision and the other appearances that he summarizes. For to Paul’s mind the body of Jesus that was laid in the tomb did not come to life, and the manifestations were not material.

On the other hand, the writers at least of the Synoptic Gospels believe that a physical resurrection took place; and therefore they are not interested in any appearance except such as indicated this physical resurrection. John possibly held a different view; but if he did the Synoptic tradition was in his time so fixed that he had to follow it in the main.

Paul, then, and the Gospels are not radically inconsistent in their accounts. Each selected such appearances as bore out the one or the other theory of the resurrection. Some at least of the appearances Paul enumerates were actual experiences, whether or not they correspond to any outward reality. Yet at the same time the Gospel stories of the physical resurrection may be based on actual occurrences.

A reanimation of the body is, however, too great a marvel to be proved on the evidence before us. Some even of the Gospel stories are really against it. For a human body cannot pass through walls, to appear to the disciples “when the doors were shut” (Jn. xx, 19 and 26; Lk. xxiv, 36 and 37), appear and disappear repeatedly without regard to physical conditions, and finally rise from earth to the sky. Moreover, the silence of Paul as to the physical manifestations is significant. He had visited Peter and received the Apostolic tradition somewhere between fifteen and twenty years after the event, while the memory of it was still fresh and many witnesses

were still alive. The Apostolic tradition must at this time have been a little uncertain as to a physical resurrection, or Paul could not have been utterly silent on this point.

Uniting, then, the evidence of the Gospels with that of Paul, we gather: First, that the disciples had such experiences as convinced them that Jesus was still alive; secondly, that they thought they had also some evidence of His bodily resurrection; but, thirdly, that they were not absolutely sure that His body had been restored to life.

What was the evidence that made them think Jesus had risen bodily? Among the Gospel stories of the resurrection, one stands in supreme and unique prominence, namely, the visit of the women to the tomb, and their finding it to be open and empty. All the Gospels, the uncanonical ones included, tell this story without serious disagreement. It is the only resurrection story to which the unanimous and consistent witness of the Gospels is given. In time of occurrence this precedes all other Gospel stories connected with the resurrection, save only Matthew's tale of the watch at the tomb. In all the others of these stories, the women's discovery is presupposed. To all of them it might give a natural occasion. The report of the empty tomb might give rise to the rumor that Jesus had come to life and walked bodily out of His grave. From this might grow other rumors of His being seen and touched, and of His eating with some of the disciples. These rumors would seem all the more likely when visions of Jesus had actually been experienced. But, on the other hand, none other of the Gospel stories, nor all of the visions, could give rise and general credence to the report that certain women had gone to the tomb on Sunday morning and found it to be empty.

A certain detail of this story of the women deserves more attention than is usually given to it. Mark relates (xvi, 5 f.) that, "entering into the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, arrayed in a white robe; and they were amazed." Matthew also writes of the angel, but tells of his being seen outside instead of within the tomb, and of his rolling away the stone door and sitting upon it (xxviii, 2 f.). Evidently these are variants of the same story, and Mark's version is the more primitive. Matthew has also a story of an appearance of Jesus to the women on their flight from the tomb (xxviii, 9, 10). The original ending of Mark probably did not contain a record of this meeting. For the abrupt ending of verse 8, "And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they were

afraid—," indicates that the writer has finished telling what they saw. Luke, moreover, tells nothing of this appearance to the women. But John (xx, 11 f.) comes to the support of Matthew in this particular.

Luke's version of the sight of angels at the tomb may throw light on Matthew's story of the appearance of Jesus to the women. He relates (xxiv 3 f.) that after they had entered the tomb and found that the body of Jesus was not there, "behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel." These were evidently angels; and apparently they were seen by the women inside the tomb. John also relates that two angels were seen in the sepulcher (xx, 11 f.). Now if an early, or perhaps the original, form of this story of the women's experience at the tomb, told of two angels being seen there, it might easily be transformed into the report that one angel and Jesus himself had been seen. But if the women had seen only the one angel, it is not easy to account for the report of two. Furthermore, (and this is a stronger point,) if they had seen anything resembling one angel alone, the story would have been quickly transformed to the effect that they had actually beheld, not an angel, but Jesus himself. Or if the story of the vision of a single angel were not based on an actual experience, it would just as quickly be transformed. Nothing but the point that two angels were seen, instead of one alone, could keep the story from changing to the effect that Jesus himself was seen.

On the other hand, we cannot think of this incident of the presence of two angels as an imaginative addition to the story of the empty tomb. If it were mythical, it would not speak of two, but only of one. The women must have actually seen what appeared to them to be two men or angels in white garments. This carries with it the necessary inference that the whole story of the visit to the tomb is in the main true.

The seeing of the angels at the tomb evidently made a deep impression on the disciples. All four of the canonical Gospels record it. John, moreover, seems bent on explaining it away. Angels are so seldom mentioned by this writer, and, when mentioned, referred to in so noncommittal a way that it is doubtful whether he believes in them. He relates, in substantial accord with Luke, that Mary Magdalene, looking into the tomb, beheld two angels in white. But he informs us (xx, 3 f.) that a little while before this, Peter and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" had gone into the tomb and seen on one side the linen cloths in which the body had been swathed, and, rolled up in a place apart, the napkin that had been upon the head.

The thought naturally suggests itself, that this was the cause why Mary Magdalene saw the two angels; and the writer seems to have had this thought in mind in telling of Peter's discovery. But beside this purpose to discount a miracle that seemed to him gross and meaningless, there is also here an effort to discredit the tradition that Peter had been the first to see the risen Jesus. For, according to the Fourth Gospel, it was not Jesus, but only the grave-clothes Peter was permitted to be first to see.

The attempt of the writer of the Fourth Gospel to rationalize the story of the angels at the tomb, is an indication that it was in his day a tradition so well established that he could not afford to ignore it.

The influence of this tradition is seen in one or perhaps two stories that relate to other occasions. The account of the ascension given in Acts (i, 9 f.) tells that, "while they were looking steadfastly into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, Ye men of Galilee——" etc. This is a close parallel to Matthew's, Mark's, and especially to Luke's story of the angels at the tomb. Compare, for example, Lk. xxiv, 4. Note also the reference to Galilee, which is given besides in Mk. xvi, 7, Matt. xxviii, 7, 10, and Lk. xxiv, 6. This story of the two angels present at the ascension, is evidently a reminiscence of the other story about the two angels at the tomb.

The tradition of the transfiguration (Mk. ix, 2 f. Mt. xvii, 1 f. and Lk. ix, 28 f.) may also have been influenced from the same source. Here also are the dazzling white garments, and the two personages from a supernatural sphere. Note, too, that according to Luke these two persons talked with Jesus "of His decease which He was to accomplish at Jerusalem." Finally, note that according to Mark and Matthew, Jesus commanded the three disciples that were with Him at the time, to keep silence respecting this thing until after His resurrection.

It has already been argued that the story of the angels must be historic, because otherwise it could not have kept its peculiar form. This conclusion is re-enforced by the consideration that the tradition of these angels was so fixed and persistent, and was potent to create the myth of the angels at the ascension, perhaps also to influence the story of the transfiguration.

Further proof of the authenticity of the women's story is found in the influence it as a whole appears to have exerted. As has been pointed out, the Gospel narratives of the resurrection are all pivoted on this story. That is to say, if these stories are myths, they could

not have arisen except on the basis of this report. The physical manifestations of Jesus, the proofs that He carried His natural body with Him, presuppose the empty tomb.

And, further, even the evidence that Paul summarizes also presupposes a physical resurrection, and consequently an empty tomb. Paul himself, as has been pointed out, did not believe in a physical resurrection. But unless the resurrection of Jesus was physical, it becomes so indefinite and indeterminable, that it cannot be identified for historical enquiry, and consequently cannot be classified as fact or fiction. Take away the defining concept of physical reanimation, and the resurrection from a thinkable historical occurrence dissipates into a series of visions, with no necessary connection and no definite and unalterable relation to an objective reality; or on the other hand it may lose itself in the general idea of personal immortality, or of living in human hearts as an influence.

To such a disintegration of the belief in the resurrection of Jesus, Paul himself was a witness and, though he did not know it, an unwilling contributor. He for his part went so far as to reject belief in a strictly physical resurrection (I. Cor. xv, 50). However, he held to the rising of a "spiritual body" resembling the natural one, but not the same, and free of all grossness (I. Cor. xv, 35 f.). This conception is necessarily vague and unstable; and it is obviously a modification of the idea of a physical resurrection. It is not surprising, then, that some of the followers of Paul took more advanced ground, and denied any sort of resurrection (I. Cor. xv, 12 f.). We must not infer that they doubted or denied the immortality of the soul. They were Greeks, and could conceive of the soul as something utterly distinct from the body. But Paul, with his Jewish training, could not go so far; and so an utter denial of the resurrection meant to him a denial of personal immortality. Such a fear we cannot share; but the point is well taken when he declares, "For if the dead are not raised, neither hath Christ been raised." The immortality of the spirit of Jesus is not disturbed by doubts of a physical resurrection. But His resurrection as a historical fact was unsettled by Paul's spiritualizing tendencies, and constructively denied by some of his followers.

The visions Paul enumerates could not of themselves alone be of great historical significance. Seeing dead men in visions was never a very rare occurrence. These visions might perhaps be subjective; but probably in an unscientific age they would be accepted without much question as evidence of the immortality of the person so seen. Such appearances, however, if they occurred at different

times for a month or a year, or possibly for several years, could not, even to an unscientific and susceptible mind, lead to the conclusion that a resurrection had taken place on a certain day. But given beforehand a report of such a resurrection, and these visions might confirm people in the belief that it had actually occurred.

But suppose these visions, or most of them, occurred on the same day—the third after the death of Jesus? In that case there must have been some occasion for their occurrence at that particular time. And that occasion could hardly be anything else than a report then received, that Jesus had risen from the grave. But even in that case it is difficult to believe that the visions would be confined to that day alone.

Accepting, then, as historical, these visions or most of them, that are mentioned by Paul, we must think that they were partly, at least, occasioned by the report of the women's experience at the tomb. This story would set the disciples in an attitude of expectancy and emotional tension very favorable to visions. Some difficulty appears, however, from the record of Mark. He declares that the women, after they had been to the tomb, "said nothing to any one." This may mean one of two things. First, that they did not immediately report what they had seen. If this is the meaning, there is no difficulty. It is easy to imagine that the women, "seized with trembling and astonishment," kept silent regarding the sight until their awe had somewhat abated. Prudence, too, may have dictated silence until they were safely out of Judea. It is possible, also, that Peter, suspecting they had something interesting to tell, questioned them until he obtained their secret.

Secondly, however, the meaning may be, that the women had carefully kept this a secret for years, until the writer of Mark, or of Mark's written source, obtained it as new or perhaps private information. In that case Mark must have had some particular reason for this explanation. We might conjecture that his purpose was to allay the wonder and suspicions of disciples that would ask, "How is it we never heard this story before?" But it is not likely the disciples would examine very curiously into such a story, or receive it with suspicion, even if it were not known until a generation after the event. They would gladly accept without question any tale of the resurrection that was not wildly improbable. We must seek another reason for Mark's explanation. It may have been felt that this evidence of the women was, after all, a weak point, and would weaken the whole story, not indeed in the eyes of the believers, but of unbelievers. Perhaps the disciples had already found this

in their efforts to convince others of the fact of the resurrection. Mark then may have wished to answer the charge already made, or to avoid its being made in the future, that all this story of the resurrection grew out of the report of two excitable women, respecting something they had seen at a tomb "very early in the morning." We can, then, imagine Mark to be saying in effect, "No, this story of the resurrection could not have begun with the women; for, until quite recently, they have been silent respecting what they saw." If such a purpose was behind Mark's statement that the women "said nothing to any one," we need not question his honesty, but may think it likely that the wish was father to the thought. On the other hand it is very unlikely that the women would keep the story strictly to themselves for any long period of time.

The story of the women is not improbable on either historical or scientific grounds. As Jesus was crucified on Friday, it was natural that the women should defer their return to Galilee until after the Sabbath. It was natural, too, that before beginning their trip homeward, they should go to see the place where Jesus had been buried. The tomb may have been opened over night. The body may have been removed just after the Sabbath to some other resting place. If this was done, it was probably done by order of the owner of the tomb. A reason for haste might be found in the fear that decomposition would set in, so that soon the removal of the body would be offensive. In the warm climate of Judea a dead body would soon show signs of decay. As to the appearance of the angels, two living men may have been in the tomb at this time. They may have returned for some purpose after removing the body. Perhaps they were talking together, and the women heard something about Galileans. This would be natural, since Jesus and His disciples were Galileans. The women, finding that the tomb was open and the body of Jesus was not inside, but seeing instead the two living men and hearing them speak—and all this in the dimness of early dawn—would naturally run away in great fear, instead of tarrying to make a careful investigation. The garments of the men may have appeared preternaturally white against the shadows of the tomb, so that the women would think they had seen angels. The men may have said to them that the body was not in that tomb. The imagination of the women would quickly add to the words, "He is not here," the further words, "He is risen." As they had overheard some remark about Galileans they would interpret it, "He goeth before you into Galilee," or else, "He told you in Galilee."

We may vary the conjectures. It may be that the men were

not at this time in the tomb, and that the voice was not heard but imagined. Certain grave-clothes may have been left when the body was removed. In the dim light of early dawn, the women may have taken these grave-clothes for living persons. Again, it is possible that the body had not been removed, but that the men were in the tomb for that purpose, at the time the women made their visit. Finding the tomb to be open, and seeing what seemed to be angels within, they concluded that Jesus had come to life and walked away. Finally, we may conjecture that the body was not at this time or ever afterward removed from the tomb. But the great stone door may have been hastily and carelessly rolled against the entrance, leaving an aperture through which one could look within. Some grave-clothes may have been left beside the body, as there had not been time for proper burial before the Sabbath. The women may have been ignorant of these circumstances. When they came to the sepulcher, they would marvel at seeing that the stone was not quite in its place. When they peered within, they could not make out the body in the dim light, but could see the grave-clothes, and thought they were looking at angels. There is, in short, a variety of not unlikely conjectures that can be made. The essential and trustworthy parts of the story are as follows: The women came to the tomb early in the morning. The stone was not in place. They looked in (perhaps hastily) but did not see the body. They did see two white objects that they took to be men or angels.

Naturally the women would think, from the presence of the angels, that something supernatural had taken place. The displacement of the stone they would attribute to the work of these angels. The fact that the body was not seen, would make them think Jesus had come back to life, with the assistance of these angels, and had walked out of the sepulcher. When they told the disciples the things they had seen and surmised, their story would cause great excitement, and in this excitement visions would easily be experienced. The first of these visions, we may well believe, was experienced, as Paul states, by Peter.

It may be well, at this point, to show that it is altogether unlikely that Peter, or any of the apostles, could have been concerned in the removal of the body, if it was really removed, or in any way parties to a fraud or deception. In the first place, they were too much dismayed by the death of their Master to think of any such scheme. But chiefly it must be urged, if they knew the faith of the early church to be based on a fraud, they would not have been wil-

ling to die for it. It is impossible to think these apostles were anything but sincere. So if the body was removed, this must have been done by order of the owner of the tomb, and the apostles must have remained in ignorance of the fact. The story of the Fourth Gospel about Peter and the beloved disciple going to the tomb after the report of the women, and carefully inspecting the place, is highly improbable. The disciples were probably at this time well on their way back to Galilee. But if Peter and John did inspect the tomb and ascertain its true condition, it would be their duty to enquire whether human hands in fact removed the body. Or, at least, what they had seen ought to have been made public, and become a part of the apostolic tradition. But the absence of any account of this in the Synoptics (Lk. xxiv, 12 is an interpolation), shows that it was not a part of the apostolic tradition.

We have, then, in this visit of the women to the tomb, the true historic basis for the Gospel stories of the resurrection. There was, however, at least one other factor that contributed to the formation of these stories—namely, the visions that our Gospels have omitted to mention, but Paul has enumerated. The story of the women would probably not have brought about this general belief in the resurrection of Jesus, without the help of these visions. It is true, on the other hand, that these visions must have been largely occasioned by the story of the women. But that is not to say that the visions were caused only by the excitement due to this story. What spiritual cause they may also have had, and whether they were entirely subjective, or were real manifestations of the spirit of Jesus, or revelations of His immortality, are questions that are, for the present at least, beyond the reach of historical enquiry. By these visions the disciples were at least convinced that their Master was still alive. If, as it appears, because of the report of the women, they also thought He had walked bodily from His tomb, it was a rash conclusion, it is true, from such slender evidence, but at any rate, only an incident to their conviction of the glorious immortality that belonged first of all to Jesus, and then to His disciples.

Lastly, it is proper, even in a strictly historical enquiry, to glance upon a certain poetic aspect of this story of the resurrection of Jesus. Without doubt the belief of disciples, from the first century until now, in the resurrection, has been based somewhat on their own personal experiences. "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world," are, according to Matthew, the last words of the risen Jesus, before he disappeared forever from the eyes of the disciples. The promise has been fulfilled from that day to this

in the experiences of many believers, who feel the actual presence of Christ in their hearts. This doubtless has made many feel that the resurrection of Jesus is indeed a thing they know to be true. And in this sense the resurrection is really true. For, beyond all considerations of personal immortality, Jesus lives to-day, perhaps as no other human personality, in the hearts of His followers.