

Jesus' 40 Days of Appearances

I Corinthians 15:1-11 and Luke 24:36-48

Have you ever noticed how the resurrection story in each gospel is a bit different? Different in terms of who came to the empty tomb, what they saw and what Jesus said to those who saw him. It's not that any one gospel is more accurate than another; it's just that each author chose to emphasize different things and left other things out. In summary, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, to the other women at the tomb, to Peter in Jerusalem, to two travelers on the road to Emmaus, to 10 disciples in Jerusalem, to 10 disciples plus Thomas in Jerusalem, to 7 disciples while fishing, to eleven disciples on the mountain, to a crowd of more than 500, to Jesus' brother James, and to the undetermined number who watched Jesus ascend into heaven.

As far as those who saw Jesus at the empty tomb, Matthew's gospel notes that it was Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (not telling us exactly who the other Mary was). It said they went at dawn to the tomb and saw an angel who told them that Jesus had risen from the dead, and that they should tell his disciples that Jesus was going ahead of them into Galilee, and there they would see him. But just as they women were hurrying away Jesus appeared to them and reiterated what the angel had just said.

The next and final mention in Matthew's gospel has Jesus appearing on a mountain in Galilee where Jesus speaks to the 11 disciples and issues the Great Commission, telling them to go and make disciples of all nations.

Comparing that account with Mark's gospel we see that Mark mentions, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome as being present at the empty tomb. The angel's appearance and message are the same about Jesus meeting his disciples in Galilee, but there is no mention of the women directly meeting Jesus; although chapter 16:9, which is part of the extended ending to Mark, does mention that Mary Magdalene met the risen Christ first. Then verse 12 mentions Jesus appearing to two who were walking in the country, and verse 14 mentions Jesus appearing to the 11 as they were eating. And in verse 15 Jesus tells them to "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."

Then if we look at Luke's gospel, Luke 24:10 identifies Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the *others* with them as being at the empty tomb. So instead of just 3 women there were probably several other women. Luke 8:3 mentions that besides Mary Magdalene there was Joanna, the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household, Susanna and many others as being women who helped support Jesus' ministry out of their means. So perhaps these were the women who together went to the empty tomb.

Luke's account mentions 2 angels appearing to the women, telling them that Jesus had risen from the dead. There is no mention of the women meeting the risen Christ personally. They went to tell the disciples what they heard, yet their story was not believed. But it mentions Peter running to the tomb, seeing the strips of linen, and wondering what had happened.

Next, Luke 24 gives a detailed account of the two walking to Emmaus and meeting the risen Christ whom they recognized as they sat down, and he broke bread for their meal. Then the two ran back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples and in vs. 34 we hear that Jesus had also appeared to Simon. Just after telling their story of meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Jesus, himself, appears to them all which was our gospel reading this morning.

And Luke gives some interesting details in which Jesus deals with some of their doubts about his appearance. Jesus tells them to not only look at his hands and feet, but to also touch him and see, saying, "a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." And because they still didn't completely believe it because of their joy and amazement, Jesus asked them for something to eat, so they gave him a piece of broiled fish, which he took and ate in their presence. I think this is important information because it gives additional concrete proof about Jesus' resurrected body, easing not only the 11 disciple's doubts, but people's doubts through history.

Also, Luke's gospel is the only one that mentions Jesus opening his disciples' minds to understand the scriptures and all that had been written about him in the Old Testament. This shows that Jesus wanted them, and wants all of us, to understand how he was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament scriptures about the Messiah suffering and rising from the dead on the 3rd day. And the fact that he said repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations shows that his salvation is not just for the Jewish people, but for all people in every nation.

Luke's gospel then concludes with Jesus telling them to stay in Jerusalem, promising to clothe them with power from on high. So there is no mention of Jesus meeting his disciples in Galilee. The last scene of this conclusion is Jesus ascending into heaven from the vicinity of Bethany.

John's gospel is quite different from the other three in that it only mentions Mary Magdalene going to the empty tomb. Significantly, Mary Magdalene is mentioned in all four gospels as being the first to meet the resurrected Christ and went to tell the disciples about it. Because of that she has been called "The Apostle to the Apostles", and I think it's very interesting that Jesus chose to appear first to this faithful, loving female follower.

Seeing that the stone had been rolled away, Mary Magdalene runs to Peter and another disciple to them, "they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

The fact that she said “we” don’t know, I think does indicate that there were others with her at the empty tomb. Then it mentions Peter and the other disciple, which could possibly be John, running to the empty tomb and going in, seeing the strips of linen, but still not understanding about Jesus’ resurrection. Then they leave. But Mary Magdalene remains crying outside the tomb, looks in, sees two angels, and then sees Jesus himself, but doesn’t recognize him until he calls her name, “Mary”. Jesus tells her not to hold on to him but to go to his brothers and tell them, “I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Then she goes and tells the disciples what Jesus said.

What’s interesting is that instead of going directly to Galilee (as the angels said he would in Matthew and Mark) or to His father, Jesus decides to show himself to the two on the road to Emmaus, then to Peter, and then to the 10 disciples in the Upper Room. Maybe that’s because Jesus knew the women’s report about the resurrection was not believed and that they needed immediate proof about his resurrection. John’s gospel also indicates that Jesus showed them his hands and side, and also says that Jesus was sending them forth with his message of forgiveness of sins. John mentions Jesus breathing on them, saying “receive the Holy Spirit”, which is perhaps another way of saying that Jesus opened their minds to understand what the scriptures said about the Messiah, as stated in Luke’s gospel.

John then gives us the story of Thomas not being present that first night when Jesus appeared to the other 10, and that it was another week until Jesus appeared to them again with Thomas. That means they all stayed for at least another week in Jerusalem after Christ’s resurrection. Then they headed to Galilee, which took about one week to walk there, because John 21 tells us that afterward Jesus appeared to 7 of them by the Sea of Galilee after they had been out fishing. They had fished all night but caught nothing. Then this man on the shore told them to cast their nets to the right side of the boat, and, when they did, they caught so many fish that they couldn’t even haul their net in. Then they realized it was Jesus. Jesus then tells them to bring some of their fish to him and he prepared breakfast for them around a campfire. John 21:14 tells us that this was the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he rose from the dead. And this was when Jesus reinstated Peter to his leadership roll among them, when he asked him three times “do you love me” and Peter responded, affirming his love for Jesus. And three times Jesus directly tells Peter, “Feed My sheep”.

Both Matthew and Mark’s gospels had indicated that Jesus would meet his disciples in Galilee, but John’s gospel is the only one that describes some of that meeting. Perhaps it was important that Jesus meet them in Galilee, because Galilee felt like home, and a safer place than Jerusalem, to many of them.

There must have been something calming and healing about meeting Jesus on the shore of Galilee, a place where Jesus had spent much time teaching them, and a place where Jesus had ministered to many people. Jesus had many more followers in Galilee and perhaps Jesus appeared to many of those people as well.

Our epistle reading from I Corinthians 15:6 indicates that Jesus appeared to more than 500 people at one time. Perhaps these were people who had followed him in Galilee. Another possibility is that Jesus appeared to people as the disciples walked back to Jerusalem. Remember in John 4 they had once stopped in a Samaritan village with Jesus, and while they were there many people from that village listened to Jesus and believed in him. It's possible Jesus appeared to more than 500 people in that Samaritan village.

We don't really know exactly who those 500 people were, but it's awesome that Jesus wanted so many people to be eyewitnesses of his resurrection. Just imagine how seeing the resurrected Christ must have strengthened their faith and given great weight and earnestness to their testimony about him.

After journeying back to Jerusalem, the disciples met together with other believers and Jesus himself continued to appear to them. Acts 1:4-5 tells us that "on one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Soon after saying that Jesus and the 11 disciples went to the Mount of Olives and there Jesus ascended into heaven. Returning to Jerusalem, verse 15 tells us that the group of believers numbered about 120 people. And there were probably at least that many people who were filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost ten days after Christ's ascension.

Thinking about these 40 days of resurrection appearances, I think it's very significant that Jesus chose to appear to so many people. And they could see that he had a real flesh and bone body; they could touch him, and he even ate food with them as further proof that he was not a ghost. It was really him in a resurrected human body! But it was a glorified body with amazing abilities; Jesus could appear and disappear in an instant, not limited by time or space. This gives us an idea of what our resurrected bodies in heaven may also be like. It's exciting to think about, isn't it?

I hope this review of the post resurrection appearances of Christ gives you awareness about how important it was for Jesus to show himself alive to so many people, who could then give eyewitness testimony to the validity of the resurrection and the truth of the gospel. May this inspire you to know with certainty that Jesus is alive, and that he wants you to likewise give witness to all you know about him, in all that he has done for you!