

CONTEXTUALIZING THE RESURRECTION STORY OF MATTHEW AND LUKE

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Abstract

Easter is marked all over the world as the time for the remembrance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is an important event in the calendar of all Christian movements. Yet the story of the resurrection of Jesus has remained very controversial down the centuries. The critical question is whether what the evangelists narrated to us in the Gospels really happened. This paper examined the resurrection stories found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and tried to find an answer to this all important question. This is with a view to contextualizing the meaning and implications of this story for the African Christian community as they seek to witness to the authenticity of the resurrection event. The researcher made use of the textual critical method of the study of the texts and used the hermeneutical method in applying the lessons learnt from the textual study of the texts. The study discovered that the resurrection stories found in both Matthew and Luke both combine to give us an authentic account of the resurrection of Jesus by the disciples. The research concludes on the note that Christians all over the world can stand on the shoulders of the disciples of Christ and recount the story of the resurrection of Jesus with all boldness.

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I. The Resurrection Story of Matthew

1. Content of the Story

According to H. L. Willmington (335), “the last two chapters in Matthew (27-28) which speak of his death and resurrection could rightly be entitled ‘The King is dead; long live the King!’” Green (311) has observed that when men are faced with the story of the resurrection of Jesus, the first question that usually crosses their mind is “Is it possible?” On his own part, Johnson (615) notes that “the resurrection of Jesus Christ is historically the foundation of the Christian church. It is presupposed in every part of the New Testament and is appealed to as a most certain fact which can confirm other truths (I Cor. 15:12-20; 29-32).” In other words, the importance of the resurrection story of Jesus cannot be underestimated.

Matthew begins his story of the resurrection of Jesus by narrating the event that took place at the twilight hours (Matt. 28:1-10). Buttrick (615) comments thus: "toward the dawn: it was not yet light. There was darkness rather, with all the threats of darkness, and a world sunk in uneasy sleep." The end of the Sabbath began from 6.00 p.m. on Saturday. However, because of the late hour, the women who went to the tomb decided to go very early the following morning, before anybody will be up and going about their daily chores. By adding the phrase "toward the first day of the week" Matthew made it very clear that the event took place on Sunday.

The significance of this emphasis by Matthew is to show that Jesus spent two full nights in the grave, that is Friday night (the day He was crucified), and Saturday night (the night after the Sabbath). However, if one considers the fact that he was buried before 6.00 p.m. on Friday, and the resurrection took place sometime before the women visited the tomb in the early hours of Sunday morning, then one can see that Jesus stayed in the grave for three days. This was meant to spell out the fact that the prediction of Jesus that he would be in the grave for three days came to pass (Matt. 12:40).

Two women visited the tomb on that first day: Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary." Why would Matthew conceal the identity of the other Mary? In the first place, he omits the name of Mary Salome, mentioned by Mark; and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, mentioned by Luke. It has been suggested that the other Mary was the wife of Cleopas, and mother of James and Joses, mentioned before (Mt 27:56). Were not Mary and Salome two distinct persons?

It would be recalled that Jesus had cast out seven demons from Mary Magdalene. Grateful for his great mercy, she was one of his firmest and most faithful followers, and was first at the sepulchre, and was first permitted to see her risen Lord. Barclay (415) believes that "there is something peculiarly fitting in that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary should be the first to receive the news of the Risen Lord, and to encounter Him." Continuing, he observes that "they had been there at the Cross, they had been there when He was laid in the tomb; and now they are receiving love's reward; they are the first to know the joy of the Resurrection." It would appear that the other Mary was not the mother of Jesus, as some speculate, but the mother of James and Joses.

Johnson (615) has observed that "Matthew omits Mark's statement that they intended to anoint the body, presumably because the watchers of the tomb would have prevented this." Matthew stated that there was a great earthquake which heralded the resurrection. At what point this happened, it is stated. Green (313) has noted that "it is probable that the earthquake had happened a little before the women arrived, and the guards were knocked to the ground with amazement both at the repetition of the earth tremor that had taken place on the Friday, and even more by the dazzling heavenly being who appeared at the tomb."

For Matthew, it was the earthquake that heralded the coming of the angel of God to roll back the stone that was used to cover the entrance to the tomb. The appearance of the angel had scared the life out of the soldiers stationed to guard the tomb. Thus from the narration of Matthew, at the time the women got to the tomb, the soldiers were still laying on the ground out of the great shock they must have received on seeing the angel. Thus,

"despite the stone, despite the guard, the tomb was empty on the first Easter Day!" (Green, 314)

According to Matthew, it was the angel who addressed the women before they could even speak. Knowing what had happened to the soldiers, the angel spoke words of courage to the women, telling them that Jesus had risen from the dead. He then took it upon himself to usher them to the site where the body of Jesus was laid. Green (314) has aptly called attention to the fact that "although by itself the empty tomb is not compelling evidence for the resurrection (there could be various reasons for its being empty)," however, for Matthew "it is a powerful supporting factor in the case for the resurrection, and Matthew wants us to know it."

After showing them the spot where Jesus had laid, he then told them to go back home and tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee as Jesus previously instructed (Matt. 26:32). The instruction that the disciples should meet Jesus in Galilee does not suggest that his only appearance would be there, for that was the seventh, but because, in that country, where the largest number of his disciples lived, he proposed to reveal himself to the whole body of saints. There he was seen "by about five hundred brethren at once" (1 Cor. 15:6).

After listening to the instruction of the angel, the two women left the graveyard more or less in a hurry and with joy in their hearts. Joy because, the narration of the angel had removed their worst fears, that Jesus was dead like just other men. It is pertinent to note that the women did not in any way expect God's wonderful miracle of resurrection. Buttrick (615-616) adds that "every account of Easter confirms the fact that the followers of Jesus were surprised and overwhelmed by his new appearing."

However, in order to convince them the more about his resurrection, Jesus himself now appeared to the women. At the sound of the greetings of Jesus, the women quickly recognized him, and fell down and worshipped him. Matthew asserts that the women touched the feet of Jesus. Then Jesus confirmed the instruction of the angel, by telling them to go and tell his disciples to meet him at Galilee.

2. Distinctive Attributes of Matthew's Story

It is necessary at this point to spell out some of the distinctive elements in the story of the resurrection of Jesus as told my Matthew.

a. Only two women went to the grave yard to see Jesus. He therefore omitted the names of Mary Salome, mentioned by Mark; and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, mentioned by Luke.

b. Matthew tells us that the resurrection of Jesus was preceded by an earthquake.

c. Matthew reports that it was only one angel who sat on the stone that had been rolled away from the entrance of the tomb.

d. The soldiers who had been stationed to guard the tomb so that the disciples of Jesus will not come by and carry his dead body were struck down in fear. Apparently they were in this condition throughout the duration of the conversation of the angel with the women.

e. Between Matthew and Luke, it is only Matthew that records the fact that Jesus appeared personally to the women before he appeared to the disciples.

f. Finally, the fact that the women fell down at the feet of Jesus, worshipped and actually touched him is reported only by Matthew. In John 20:17, Jesus refused that he be touched by Mary.

II. The Resurrection Story of Luke

1. Content of the Story

Tolbert (182) is of the view that the resurrection story of Luke “is divided into three episodes which are put together in such a way as to form a connected, excellently constructed literary unit. Only in the first episode does one find parallels with the other Gospels, but even this unit is distinctive.” The other two episodes relate to the resurrection story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-32) and the appearance of Jesus to the disciples at the time the two disciples from Emmaus were reporting their experience of the risen Lord (Luke 24: 33-53). These two episodes, according to Tolbert (182) “are set in Jerusalem or its immediate environs. The manner of presentation is determined to a great extent by certain Lukan motifs and concepts. In Luke the action in the life of Jesus moves from Galilee to Jerusalem. The Jewish capital then becomes the centre from which the witness of the early church begins.”

The story of Luke (24:1-12) is filled with graphic details of what actually happened on that first resurrection morning. He defined what Matthew described “as it began to dawn” to mean “very early in the morning.” Matthew Henry (298) comments: “As soon as ever they could, after the Sabbath was over, they *came to the sepulcher*, to embalm his body, to anoint the head and face, and perhaps the wounded hands and feet, and to scatter sweet spices upon and about the body as it is usual with us to strew flowers about the dead bodies and graves of our friends.”

According to Luke more than two women went to the tomb of Jesus on that first day of the week. He puts it this way: “they came to the sepulcher … and certain others with them.” This is in verse1. It was only when he got to verse10 that he identifies Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James, as those who led the other women to the grave site.

On getting to the tomb, the women discovered that the stone had been rolled away. Luke does not mention an earthquake. The women simply walked right into the tomb only to find that it was empty. It was after they came out of the tomb that they found two men in shinning clothes, apparently angels, who then addressed them. The women quickly fell on their faces in fear of these strange men. Matthew Henry (298) has rightly observed that “good Christians often perplex themselves about that with which they should comfort and encourage themselves.” The women ought not to have been afraid of the angels, they ought to have rejoiced.

But the angels addressed them by asking why they were looking for the living among the dead. They reminded them of what Jesus had told them about his death and resurrection. At that point, what Jesus had told them became clear to them. They left the gravesite to tell the other disciples.

Luke also states that the apostles could not believe what the women were saying. They felt that the women were either hallucinating or something else had happened to them. “They thought it was only the fancy of the women, and imputed it to the power of

imagination, for they also had forgotten Christ's words" (Henry, 298). It was as a result of the account of the resurrection given to them that Peter rose to go to the tomb to see for himself what the women were saying. When he got there he went inside and saw the linen clothes used to cover the dead body of Jesus lying there on their own. He became really perplexed, wondering what had happened. Note should be taken of what Matthew Henry (298) has to say about the action of Peter: "many that are *swift*-footed enough when there is no danger are but *cow*-hearted when there is."

2. Distinctive Attributes of Luke's Story

It is time to isolate the distinctive elements in the resurrection story of the Evangelist Luke.

a. According to Luke, more than three women went to the tomb in the early hours of the first day of the week. Luke identifies Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James as the three women who led other women to the tomb site. Tolbert (183) has called attention to the fact that Mark names Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome as witnesses to the crucifixion (Mark 15:40). However, "only Luke mentions Joanna, while he does not refer to Salome." According to Tolbert these are the Galilean witnesses who followed him to Jerusalem, watched him die, saw him buried, and discovered the empty tomb.

b. Luke asserts that the specific reason why the women went to the tomb was for the purpose of embalming the body of Jesus. The spices they took along with them was meant for this purpose.

c. The women actually walked into the tomb on finding that the stone which was used to seal it had been rolled away. This was Luke's way of calling attention to the fact that the tomb was indeed empty.

d. Two angels, instead of one, addressed the women, with the unique words "Why seek ye the living among the dead?" Leaney (291), according to Tolbert (183) "holds that the two men serve to link the resurrection with the transfiguration. He identifies them as Moses and Elijah."

e. Luke specifically mentions the fact that on leaving the tomb, the women went home and told the disciples what they had seen. This fact is completely omitted by Matthew. One can see behind Matthew's omission of the report of the women, the bias of the average Jew against women.

f. It was in reaction to the report of the women that Peter decided to go to the tomb to see things for himself. Porter (1226) wants recalls that in Mark, the women were so startled by the events at the tomb that they found themselves unable to give the message to the disciples. In Luke, on the other hand, they went and reported to the disciples all that has happened, though of course there is no message of a rendezvous in Galilee for them to convey.

III. A Comparative Study of the Two Stories

This study of the resurrection stories found in Matthew and Luke has revealed that though the two Evangelists were telling the same story, they did so from different perspectives. This made each person to attach importance to what the other person did not deem

important. It is therefore now time to carry out a brief comparative study of some of the things that are common to both writers, and some of those that are peculiar to each of them.

a. The Appearance to the Women

Both writers confirm the presence of at least two women at the tomb on the first Easter morning. We recall that Tolbert (183) observed that Mark names Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome as witnesses to the crucifixion (Mark 15:40). However, it is only Luke who mentions the name of Joanna, while he does not refer to Salome. In other words, while Matthew mentions only Mary Magdalene by name, and the anonymous Mary, Luke identifies Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joanna specifically.

The point of agreement between the two writers is Mary Magdalene. Her identity was not in question. Neither was her loyalty. One can safely assume that the other Mary of Matthew would most likely be Mary the mother of James of Luke. Mark mentions Salome which Luke did not. However, there is no mistaking the fact that for both Matthew and Luke there is a consensus that the women were the first to appear at the tomb to witness the events of the resurrection morning.

Green (313) observes that "women counted for little in both Jewish and Greco-Roman circles in those days. They were nobodies; they were goods and chattels; they could in some circumstances be offered for sale; they could not bear witness in a court of law." Yet Matthew a Jew, and Luke a Gentile, both record the fact that the first appearance of Jesus Christ on the day of the resurrection was to women. Green (313) makes the significant observation that no name of any woman appeared in the list of witnesses to the resurrection in the account of Paul in I Corinthians 15.

It is in the face of all these evidences that one has to say that the story of the appearances of Jesus to the women in the resurrection story of Jesus is as authentic as it can be. Perhaps having realized that he had given too much importance to the women in the story, Matthew fails to mention the fact that it was the women who took the report of these events to the disciples. It was perhaps too much for Matthew to admit that the women were not just the first to be at the tomb, but they brought the message of the resurrected Jesus.

Luke did not have such inhibitions. After reinforcing the list of the women who went to the tomb, Luke went further to confirm that it was indeed the women who took the message to the disciples. Though they doubted their report, yet it is on record that the women brought the report of the first words of Jesus to any living human being after his resurrection.

b. The Presence of the Angels

It is instructive to note that though Luke did not mention the earthquake, he did not fail to mention the presence of the angels. While Luke avers that there were two of them, Matthew states that there was only one (Brown, 294f). Whether one or two, the presence of the Angels was to confirm how the stone used to seal the entrance of the grave was removed. Ryle (377) has rightly observed that surely the Priests and Scribes and other enemies of Christ would not have come to roll the stone away. For "if they had had Christ's body to show in disproof of his resurrection, they would gladly have shown it."

This observation of Ryle must be placed alongside the insinuation which one finds in Matthew that the soldiers said that it was the disciples of Jesus who came to steal the body of Jesus. The report of both the earthquake and the presence of the angels should therefore be seen as the response of the disciples of Jesus to this falsehood that was been spread all over the place. According to both Matthew and Luke, the combined effect of the earthquake and the presence of the angels is that the soldiers who were posted to watch over the body of Jesus were in a deep state of unconsciousness when the whole event took place. Buttrick (616) writes that the angel “struck fear into (the) men’s hearts, and held them in a speechless awe.” So their story that the body of Jesus was stolen by the disciples of Jesus was a cover up for their failure!

Matthew Henry (298) points out that “these angels from heaven bring not any new gospel, but put them in mind of the sayings of Christ, and teach them how to improve and apply them.” In other words, another reason for the appearance of the Angels in both stories is to remind the women of the things which Jesus had taught them, more especially about the fact that He would rise from the dead after His crucifixion.

c. The Instructions to the Women

One very important area in which there seem to be a major difference between the two writers is in the instructions given to the women. To Luke, as soon as the angels asked: “Why seek ye the living among the dead” and reminded them of what Jesus had told them earlier, they recollect, and upon this recollection, ran back home to deliver the message to the other disciples. For Matthew the encounter of the women was in two phases:

First was the dialogue they had with the angel. After assuring them that Jesus was not in the tomb, and showing them the empty tomb, he then specifically instructed them to go and tell the disciples to meet Jesus at Galilee. The importance of this instruction lies in the concluding part of the story of the resurrection as told by Matthew, and that is the giving of the Great Commission. If there was no meeting at Galilee, there could not have been a Great Commission.

Then to confirm that it was not just in response to the instruction of the angel that the women went and told the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee, Jesus himself now appeared to the women. After giving them that warm greeting “Be glad!” (Buttrick, 619) he then instructs the women to go and tell his disciples to meet him in Galilee. Though Buttrick (619) seems to suggest that the word “brethren” in Matthew 28:10 could refer to the immediate family of Jesus, since “the early Church stressed the fact of a resurrection appearance to James, the brother of Christ” it appears more in line with the context of the resurrection story that Jesus would be thinking more of his disciples at this time than his immediate family.

Put together therefore one can see that the combined effect of the twin stories of the resurrection of Jesus as found in both Matthew and Luke confirm both the historicity and actuality of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Both writers took time to give a detailed account of the events which took place on that day. What is omitted in one is complemented by the other such that both stories put together give a very balanced and undisputed story of the resurrection of Jesus.

d. The Emmaus Road Experience

Tolbert (182) noted above that the resurrection story of Luke “is divided into three episodes which are put together in such a way as to form a connected, excellently constructed literary unit. Only in the first episode does one find parallels with the other Gospels, but even this unit is distinctive.” The second episode, which does not have parallel in the other Gospels, is the story of the appearance of Jesus to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

The story runs from Luke 24:13-35. Ryle (380) remarks that “the history contained in these verses is not found in any other Gospel but that of St. Luke.” Luke simply states that Jesus walked with two disciples, giving the name of one of them as Cleopas, (Lu 24:18). Some scholars have supposed that the other was Luke, and that he omitted his own name from an act of modesty. Others have supposed that it was Peter (Lu 24:34; 1Co 15:5). There is no evidence to guide us here. Dr. Lightfoot has shown that Cleopas is the same name as Alpheus, who was the father of the apostle James (Mt 10:3). The important thing here is that the identity of at least one of the disciples is not in dispute. This, to a reasonable extent, establishes some measure of historical authenticity as far as this story is concerned.

The summary of the story is that Jesus appeared and walked with these two disciples without their recognizing Him. Both Mark 16:12 and Luke 24:33 intimates us with the fact that after His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples in different forms. He might have done that in this case. Throughout the journey of about seven miles, Jesus made sure that the disciples did not recognize him so that He could freely discuss with them. This is particularly important in view of the fact that as at this time, it would appear that the women had returned from the tomb, reported their findings, and that the men found it difficult to accept the report of the women (Ryle 381).

Thus the appearance of Jesus to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus was recorded by Luke primarily for the purpose of not only establishing the historical authenticity of the resurrection itself, but to show how Jesus was able to dispel the fears in the minds of His disciples concerning the event. He made them understand that He “was the substance of every Old Testament sacrifice ordained in the law of Moses” (Ryle 381). When they got home and it was time to break bread, Jesus was invited to carry out this function. At this point, Jesus must have assumed His real form, that is, the form in which the disciples could recognize him. For as soon as he finished saying the prayer, he disappeared from them. The point at which the disciples recognized Jesus was the terminus of the mission of Jesus. He had convinced them of the facts of the resurrection, by not only confirming the Old Testament predictions about the event, but by physically appearing to them, discussing with them, and even sitting at the table to have a meal with them.

e. The Appearance to the Disciples

It is interesting to note that though Matthew reports that the angels and Jesus instructed the women to go and tell His disciples that He would meet with them, it is only Luke that gives us an account of the actual appearance of Jesus to the Disciples (Green 314). According to Luke 24:36-43, while the disciples from Emmaus were still telling the story of what

transpired between them and Jesus earlier in the day, Jesus Himself made a grand appearance (Ryle 383). With the doors and windows firmly shut, Jesus was able to admit Himself into the house where they were meeting. This story is to show that the form in which Jesus appeared to the disciples after His resurrection is not that same form that is limited by physical barriers.

Sensing that the disciples were still doubting the reports of both the women and the two disciples, Jesus told them to give him something to eat. This was to prove to them that he was not a ghost in the sense in which they understood that word. He equally invited them to put their hands in the holes made by the nails that were driven through them on the cross. By this time it is clear that the wounds would not have healed. The wounds would therefore be an objective testimony to the fact that he was not an apparition or that they were not going through hallucination as some scholars would like to believe. According to Ryle (384) by this action, Jesus “appeals to the bodily sense of the eleven. He bids them touch him with their own hands and satisfy themselves that he was a material being and not a spirit or ghost.”

The appearance of Jesus to the disciples was therefore another forum, which Jesus used to convince them of the truth of his resurrection. Scholars should be grateful to the Evangelist Luke for recording the two incidences of the road to Emmaus and this particular one. In them, Jesus is trying to erase from the minds of the disciples any doubts concerning his resurrection from the dead.

e. The Ascension of Jesus

Both Matthew and Luke recorded the appearance of Jesus to a larger audience on the day that He ascended into heaven. Both agree that the event took place within the vicinity of Bethany. While Matthew (28:16) did not specify the mountain, Luke (24:50) did. Bethany was on the eastern declivity of the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives was the site for many of the events which took place in the life of Jesus (Johnson, 621). According to Green (320) the book of Matthew “ends on a mountain, just as it had begun (after Jesus’ birth and temptation) on a mountain.” Bethany was a favored place also. It was the home of Martha, and Mary, and Lazarus, and Jesus delighted to be there.

It was at this favored spot that Jesus made his final appearance to the disciples. Between the first appearance of Jesus to the women on the first resurrection morning and the day of the ascension, forty days had elapsed. One can therefore safely assume that Jesus must have made several other appearances to his disciples. But the one in Bethany was the grand finale. When Paul in I Corinthians 15 mentioned the fact that Jesus appeared to more than 500 people at one time, one can safely assume that he was referring to the event of the ascension of Jesus.

The ascension of Jesus was the final attestation to the fact of the resurrection. According to Matthew, before he finally left them, he gave them the marching order, what is today called the Great Commission. Johnson (621) opines that “there is a widespread tradition that such a commission was given, though it takes various forms.” Luke records this commission in a different way in Acts 1. The important thing is that both record the fact that when Jesus made his final appearance, he took time to discuss with them (Ryle 386). Again this is to confirm that the appearance should not be seen as an illusion or a

makeup story by the disciples. He not only gave them a marching order, He lifted up his arms and blessed them. This was the final benediction. The fact that the disciples held on to and passed on this benediction is evidence enough that it meant much to them.

IV. African Christianity and the Resurrection Stories

Commenting on the resurrection of Jesus, Green (311) has this observation: Dead people don't rise. If we are asked to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, this must be something quite unparalleled. There is nothing comparable in Judaism. There is nothing comparable in the Greco-Roman world. Mythological stories of the raising of Adonis or Isis and Osiris are totally beside the point. They were just stories. Nobody believed they had happened. They never existed. But the resurrection stories of Jesus concern a man whom they all knew. He was executed in a very public manner. He was seen to be alive and well, but in a strangely other mode of existence, three days later and for the next six weeks before being finally parted from his infant church. This is unparalleled in the history of the world.

There is no doubt that in the resurrection stories of both Matthew and Luke Christians are confronted with the fact that "the resurrection of Jesus" has become "the sign of God's triumph over the power of sin and death. In other words, it had cancelled the fall of Adam and all human slavery that had resulted from it, for Christ the crucified had entered the glory of God as the first among many." (Coenen, 277).

Brown (281) has put forward the objections of men like Rudolf Bultmann to the story of the resurrection, with the later maintaining 'the incredibility of a mystical event like the resuscitation of a corpse' which is what the resurrection of Jesus means to Bultmann. There are other New Testament scholars who take the same position with Bultmann. But there are far more who hold on to the fact of the resurrection than those who deny it. For Ryle (377) "the resurrection of Christ is one of the great foundation stones of the Christian religion. In practical importance it is second only to the Crucifixion."

J. A. T. Robinson (43) makes it absolutely clear that "though the event itself is nowhere described, the resurrection of Jesus Christ represents the watershed of New Testament history and the central point of its faith." Ryle (377) puts it this way: "the fact of our Lord's resurrection rests on evidence which no infidel can ever explain away. It is confirmed by testimony of every kind, sort and description. The plain unvarnished story which the Gospel writers tell about it is one that cannot be overthrown."

Commenting specifically on the fact of the resurrection, Robinson (45-49) calls attention to three points:

a. The Empty Tomb: Robinson (46) makes it very clear that "when we turn to the gospels, their evidence on the empty tomb is in substance unanimous." Analysis of the stories of both Matthew and Luke has shown the extent to which both writers went in order to establish the fact of the empty tomb. While one can say that there are some differences in some aspects of their stories, Robinson (46) opines that "none of these, however, is the kind of difference that impugns the authenticity of the narrative. Indeed,

they are all precisely what one would look for in genuine accounts of so confused and confusing a scene.”

b. The Appearances: Robinson (47) believes that when one takes the accounts of both Matthew and Luke together, “it was the appearances, not the tomb, that was decisive for the disciples’ faith.” Ryle (379) has called attention to the fact that the unbelief of the apostles when the women told them the story of the empty tomb “is one of the strongest indirect evidences that Jesus rose from the dead.” This is against the backdrop of the role of women in the ancient world. The incredulity which the disciples displayed fits in very well with what would have happened at that time. However, there is no doubt that the appearances of Jesus to His disciples, both at the grave side and after, is of paramount importance to the story of the resurrection.

c. The Experience of the Living Christ: Robinson (48) remarks that if the appearances of Jesus had been merely psychic phenomena, as some presume, one would have expected the sense that Jesus was alive to have grown progressively less vivid once the disciples ceased to see Him after the resurrection, and those who had not seen the evidence to be as skeptical as third parties usually are to such supposed communications from the dead – let alone to reports of miraculously empty graves. “But in fact,” Robinson continues, “the conviction became only the more settled once the appearances had ceased.” Robinson (49) then concludes thus: “this abiding and transforming experience, grounded, not on the reports of others, but on the firsthand awareness of the living Christ, is what made and sustained the Christian Church. And the very existence of the Church, not merely as the historical consequence of past phenomena but as the embodiment of a present faith, is itself a major part of the evidence of the Resurrection.”

One must view the last observation of Robinson above with all the seriousness it deserves. When he talks of “the firsthand awareness of the living Christ,” he is talking about something similar to the experience of the living Christ which Paul had on his way to Damascus. The events of that day were so real to Paul that he could later claim that Christ appeared to him. The history of Christianity has revealed and confirmed that the experience of the living Christ which Paul had has been replicated in the lives of countless other Christians down the ages.

V. Conclusion

Porter (1226) believes that “the fact of the resurrection is one of the best historically attested facts of ancient history.” The combined effect of the stories of both Matthew and Luke concerning the resurrection of Jesus point to the fact that there is really no reason whatsoever to doubt the authenticity of that story and the event.

For African Christian witness therefore, the resurrection stories serve as a very solid ground on with to rest their faith in a living God. In the midst of myths and traditions of ancestors who exhibited great powers in their times and so became deified, the African Christian can turn to the resurrection story and affirm faith, not in mythology, but in an event that actually took place, witnessed and confirmed by many. Relying on the story of the authenticity of the resurrection of Jesus, they can go to all the nooks and crannies of the African continent to proclaim a living God who gives salvation to all who come to Him through His living Son.

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