

Building our Faith

The Sign of the Resurrection #6

The ultimate sign and proof of Christianity is the resurrection of Jesus. In our lessons on the resurrection we have explored the facts the gospel writers give us concerning the death, burial, and the circumstances at the tomb of Jesus on the first day of the week. And now we are looking at the capstone of the proof of the resurrection--the witnesses who saw Jesus after His crucifixion. In our last two lessons we have looked at six remarkable eye-witness accounts of the resurrection, Jesus' appearance to:

Mary Magdalene at the tomb

The women near the tomb

Cleopas and another disciple on the road to Emmaus

Simon Peter

Ten of the apostles on the first day of the week

Eleven of the apostles eight days later

But as we read the NT we are able to see that even this does not exhaust the evidence God has given us for our faith in this most important truth. Let's consider three more post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.

The appearance to seven of the apostles by the Sea of Galilee

Details of the appearance

John alone records the appearance of Jesus to a group of seven apostles by the Sea of Tiberias (Galilee). Peter tells some of the group that he is going fishing; and his companions Andrew, James, and John join him along with Thomas, Nathaniel, and two unnamed disciples.

That night they had fisherman's luck and early in the morning as they came toward the shore Jesus called out to them, "*Children, have you caught any fish?*" They responded, "*No.*"

Jesus urged them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat and immediately their nets were full of large fish (153 in all when they later counted them).

*That disciple therefore whom Jesus loved *said to Peter, "It is the Lord." And so when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea. (Jn. 21:7)*

Observations about the appearance

Since the apostles were from Galilee it is expected that they would return back home after the Passover celebration.

Some commentators point out that Peter's proposal to go fishing might simply be understood as his attempt to provide a living for himself after depending upon others during the time of his travel with the Lord.

Others suggest that the apostles had questions about their suitability to do the Lord's work in view of their dismal failure to keep faith with

him at his trial and death. Maybe Peter in particular might have thought that he might be a better "fisher of fish" than a "fisher of men" in view of His denial. All of them needed assurance that Jesus had a job for them to do; and that they could trust Him to provide what they needed.

How better could Jesus do that than to take them back to the experience a couple of years when they had experienced a similar miraculous draught of fish that had led them to follow Jesus permanently as his helpers in teaching (cf. Lk. 5) and then to provide the loaves and fish for them like he had done when he fed the 5000. In Jesus' conversation with Peter, he implicitly reminds him of his denials by asking him three times, "Do you love me more than these?" These questions gave him the opportunity to reaffirm his love; and in return Jesus charges Peter with the important work of taking care of His flock.

Jesus' miraculous provision and call to service then make it clear that he has forgiven them all of their disloyalty and that He has work for them to do.

Moreover, this appearance of Jesus once more makes clear that He was really alive, now several days at least after His crucifixion. John especially notes that there was no doubt in their minds that it was Jesus who was with them:

*None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord. Jesus *came and *took the bread, and *gave them, and the fish likewise. This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead. (Jn. 21:12-14)*

Jesus' miraculous provision of breakfast made clear to them that He was the same powerful Lord they had known before His death.

One assumes that Jesus joined with them in eating the breakfast he had prepared for them, giving them sure proof of His bodily resurrection.

The apostles now have had three distinct appearances from Jesus that confirm His resurrection from the dead.

The appearance to more than five hundred brethren at one time

Details of the appearance

It may be that Jesus' appearance by the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee motivated the apostles to gather together as many of Jesus' disciples as possible to "the mountain" where Jesus had taught them so that they might have the opportunity to witness His resurrection.

The apostle Paul in his discussion of the resurrection in 1 Cor. 15 mentions a remarkable appearance of Jesus to a large number of assembled disciples:

"After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;" (1 Cor. 15:6, NASB)

Paul does not identify the exact time and place of this appearance; but one possibility might be an appearance in Galilee where Jesus had many disciples. The angels at the tomb had urged the disciples to go there so that they could see Him, perhaps along with other Galilean followers:

*"Then Jesus *said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they shall see Me." (Mt. 28:10, NASB)*

Jesus had indicated before his death that he would meet with them there:

*Then Jesus *said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.' But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee." (Mt. 26:31-32)*

Therefore Matthew follows these promises with an account of this appearance.

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. And when they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Mt. 28:16-20)

Observations about the appearance

It may be that the appearance Paul mentions to over 500 is this appearance and includes not only the eleven, but also a host of other disciples of Jesus in Galilee. This may explain why "some" are said to have doubted. Perhaps they were reluctant to fall down and worship the one they saw until they were sure that it was the Lord.

What is especially noteworthy about this appearance is the large number of people who were eye-witnesses to the event. The honest mentioned of some doubters does not nullify the evidence. In fact, it indicates what we would expect in the experience of a large crowd. Many of these witnesses were still alive when Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians around AD 54-55. If this event had not occurred, it would have been convenient to simply say, "Wish you might have had a chance to interview one of them; but they're all now dead." But instead Paul affirms that a person could verify the truth about what he said by talking to the witnesses that still lived.

The Lord's commission would send them back to Jerusalem from where they would begin to proclaim the gospel to every creature.

The Appearance to James

Details of the appearance

Only Paul mentions this appearance of Jesus to James:

then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; (1 Cor. 15:7)
Paul is referring to James the Lord's earthly brother. The gospels give no information about this appearance; but it has great evidential value.

Observations about the appearance

The gospels tell us that Jesus had several earthly brothers:

"Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? (Matthew 13:55)

James was one of those brothers; and it is clear that he, along with his other brothers, did not believe in Jesus as the Christ:

Now the feast of the Jews, the Feast of Booths, was at hand. His brothers therefore said to Him, "Depart from here, and go into Judea, that Your disciples also may behold Your works which You are doing.

"For no one does anything in secret, when he himself seeks to be known publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world."

For not even His brothers were believing in Him. (Jn. 7:2-5)

Yet we see in the book of Acts that Jesus' brothers now find themselves in the congregation of the disciples:

These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. (Ac. 1:14)

James especially would become a leader of the Jerusalem church (Ac. 15:13). He is most likely the author of the NT book called "the epistle of James."

How can we explain this transformation of Jesus' brothers from unbelief to belief? If they had doubted that he was the Christ, how easily would they have been convinced that Jesus was alive after His death?

When people make dramatic changes, we have to look for some cause adequate to motivate them to make that change. It would seem that the appearance to James would be that adequate cause for their conversion.

Thus, the conversation of James and His brothers is a strong argument for the resurrection of Jesus.

Conclusion: As we continue to look at the evidence, we can see how powerfully the evidence accumulates that we serve a living Savior.