



CHRISTIANITY

RENEWED

VOLUME 2

Maxwell Alexander

**Christianity Renewed**  
**Volume II**  
**Questions Christians Ask**

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## Foreword

The glorious message of Jesus the Christ has been so completely misunderstood that its survival over the centuries has become one of the greatest proofs of its truth. Nothing but the power of Almighty God could have enabled it to exert the enormous worldwide influence as it has done, and still does.

Christianity today is divided, and unable to stop the decline of humanity into chaos and disaster. Yet its greatest hope, forgotten, unbelieved, or even ridiculed, lies in the very words of Jesus Himself. Several times, the record states, He promised to come again “in the glory of the Father” or as “the Spirit of Truth”, and this promise was incorporated in the early centuries into the major official creeds. At various times over the long two thousand years since it was made it became the central theme of Christian hope.

Now, when all the detailed circumstances described in the 24th chapter of St. Matthew, which would attend that wonderful event have come about and are indeed the experience of our daily lives, Christianity is hopelessly divided in itself about Christian truth and its validity, and has ignored the injunction to “watch and pray” for the time when He would come “like a thief in the night”.

Maxwell Alexander’s excellent presentation of this vital theme rests on the words of Jesus Himself as recorded in the Gospels. He shows how spiritual truths have been taken by simple and naive people to have impossible literal meanings. These have, under the weight of traditional authority, crystallized into doctrines until the Sun of Truth has become clouded over by obscurantism, bigotry, narrow mindedness and prejudice. It is these clouds that disappear with the new sunrise, revealing in all its splendour and beauty the eternal spiritual Truth. This is indeed the renewal, the triumph of Christianity

David Hofman (Former member of the  
Universal House of Justice)

## Chapter 11: Spiritual meaning of the Resurrection

*“For Christ ... being put to death in the flesh, but quickened [made alive] by the Spirit ...”* (I Peter 3:18)

### Introduction

Easter is a time of great celebrations. It is a major event in the Christian calendar. First, there is the sadness of ‘Good Friday’, the day when Jesus was crucified. This is the time when all reflect on the suffering and pain of Jesus. Then on Sunday comes the time of rejoicing with the remembrance of the Resurrection.

Until the end of the 19th century, all Christians accepted the Resurrection and the Ascension of Jesus as two different events separated by a period of forty days in which the risen Jesus appeared to his followers. But during the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Bible scholars started to study the Bible more critically they came to different conclusions. Some Christians take the Resurrection stories of the Bible literally whilst others are not sure of their real intention. The Bahá’í Writings offer guidance for a better understanding of the great significance of the Resurrection in which Jesus was raised up.

### Spiritual meaning of the ‘Resurrection of the Saints’

Several stories about dead people who arose from their graves are found in the New Testament. Matthew tells us about a strange event that occurred when Jesus died on the cross:

*“And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves **after his resurrection**, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.”*

(Matt. 27:52–3)

In this passage Matthew tells that the saints arose from their graves after His Resurrection. Yet according to the text this event occurred just after Jesus died on the cross. So this statement of Matthew is telling us that the death and the Resurrection occurred at approximately the same time (in other words – there is no three days in between). Much later the Christian calendar began to commemorate the death of Jesus on Friday whilst the Resurrection is celebrated on Sunday.

We could also ask ourselves what happened to those saints who came out of the grave. There are only three possibilities; either they

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are still walking around; or they returned back to the grave; or that the story has a symbolic meaning.

It is indeed very unlikely that an event such as bodies of the saints arising physically from the dead really happened. If such an amazing incident had really occurred it would certainly have been mentioned in history books. Also, everyone who witnessed it would have been compelled into belief. Other than this Gospel, no mention of such an occurrence has ever been made by historians. Even the renowned Jewish historian, Josephus, who recorded in detail many events in Jerusalem during that time, did not mention it.

The fact that this story only appears in the Gospel of Matthew and not the other three Gospels, further supports the idea that it has a symbolic or spiritual meaning. Perhaps the reason why Matthew related these events was because he was trying to convince a hostile Jewish population that Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the Old Testament. He knew that the day of the coming of the Messiah would also be the day of Judgement. Jews believed that on the day of Judgement the dead would be physically resurrected and appear before the Lord to be judged. For Matthew, the day of Judgement had now come.

#### **The transfiguration of Jesus**

Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus took Peter, James and John up on a mountain. Jesus becomes radiant (transfigured) and suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them "*And there appeared unto them Elijah with Moses: and they were talking with Jesus.*" (Mark 9:4) This story has many spiritual meanings.

The transfiguration convinced the three that Jesus was indeed the Promised One as it raised Jesus to the same level as the pre-eminent figures of Judaism. (Also Moses was transfigured on Mount Sinai)

But they were very confused as they knew that according to the scripture Elijah had to come before the coming of the Messiah. Jesus told them plainly Elijah had returned as John the Baptist.<sup>2</sup>

This appearance of Moses and Elijah both of whom had died many centuries ago must have been a tremendous shock for the

disciples but the appearance was of a spiritual nature and not an appearance of the body.

In this way, they received an understanding that the spirit of Moses and Elijah had eternal life and that this spiritual existence was not dependent on a body.

The sorrowful heart finds it hard to accept separation. By showing the disciples that Moses and Elijah still existed in a spiritual way, Jesus gave them strength and prepared them to accept His physical death. Those three disciples Peter, James and John later understood the spiritual meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. *“For Christ also hath once suffered for sins ... being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit.”* (1 Peter 3:18)

They remembered the promise of Jesus: *“... I am with you always, even until the end of the world.”* (Matt. 28:20). Belief in the resurrection meant that God raised Jesus up and placed Him on His exalted, eternal throne. Modern theologians call the resurrection ‘the act of God to raise Jesus in the meaning of God’.

### **Raising from the dead**

We should note that there are several stories in the Bible about the bringing of the dead back to life. We have already in the previous chapter on miracles mentioned how Elisha raised a dead child.

The story of how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, after he had been in the tomb for four days, is only told in the spiritual Gospel of John. (Surprisingly, Mark, Mathew and Luke do not mention this sensational raising of Lazarus from the dead at the gates of Jerusalem). Since the story of such an extraordinary event is not found in the other Gospels, one could understand that John was giving us a spiritual truth within a story that only serves as an illustration. Indeed John’s Gospel, the last Gospel to be written, places the greatest importance in presenting Jesus as a divine miracle worker. Many of the stories told about miracles have a deep spiritual meaning as their foundation. The stories mostly illustrate spiritual principles. Most theologians believe that the story of Lazarus was told in the early church to illustrate the power of Jesus and that John used this story to bring us a spiritual truth. Let us

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study the spiritual meaning behind the story. This is found at the end of the story when Jesus concluded:

“... *I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live ...*” (John 11:25)

Obviously, Lazarus, and all the others who believed in Jesus, would later have died physically anyway. Therefore, what Jesus meant by ‘*life*’ was to believe in Him and accept His Teachings. What Jesus meant by ‘*dead*’ is made very clear in the following sentence: “*And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.*” (John 11:26) Naturally, everyone has to die one day. It is best to understand this statement spiritually - that those who do not believe in Jesus are spiritually dead.

#### **Resurrection in the Old Testament**

The oldest reference to the resurrection of the dead is found in the Book of Daniel: “*And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt*” (Daniel 12:2) This verse reminds us how Saint Paul employs similar terminology describing the Resurrection in his Epistles.

Another reference is found in the second book of the Maccabees which describes the cruel torture and agonising death of seven Jewish martyrs (brothers) in detail. The reason for execution is that they refused to eat pork. The King is outraged but even under the greatest torture they refuse to break this Jewish law.

The second brother exclaimed with his last breath “*the King of the world will raise us up, since it is for his laws that we die, to live again for ever*” (2 Maccabees 7:9)

In Judaism the injustice of martyrdom is answered by the above quotation. Indeed what is the meaning of a martyr’s death if after suffering the greatest injustice in this life they are not raised up by God in the life hereafter?

There can be no doubt that this was the main question the apostles were asking after the terrifyingly cruel death of Jesus when He cried out “*My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?*” (Mark 15:34)

It was only through the power of the Holy Spirit and by searching the scriptures for further clues that the early believers were able to understand the significance of His death. For example Jesus was the suffering servant foretold by Isaiah. *“He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.”* (Isaiah 53:3)

These beautiful verses of Isaiah would provide the background against which the evangelists would much later paint the drama of the crucifixion of Jesus.

### **Resurrection appearances of Jesus according to Paul**

Paul said: *“...And that he was seen of Cephas then of the twelve; after that he was seen of above five-hundred brethren at once ...After that he was seen of James then of all the apostles and and last of all, he was seen of me also...”* (1Corinthians 15:5-7)

This list is very different from the list found in the Gospels.

First we must explain what Paul means with the verb “seen”. Paul is using the Greek word “*ophthe*” . This is a passive verb which simply expresses Paul's claim that Jesus “*appeared*” to them. This verb “*ophthe*” is used often in the Bible. For example *“And a vision ‘appeared’ to Paul in the night.* (Acts 16:9) This verse connects “*ophthe*” with a vision at night.

Paul is also using the same verb “*ophthe*” when he describes his personal experience on the way of Damascus. It is surprising that Paul claims to have ‘*seen*’ Jesus. It is important to study Paul’s resurrection appearance as it is the only written account in the Bible of someone who ‘*saw*’ the resurrected Jesus. None of the apostles told us about their experience. The stories are told to us by the evangelists who were not direct witnesses. What happened to Paul was a miraculous conversion experience. By ‘*seeing*’ Jesus Paul explains how he was spiritually blind to the truth of Jesus but then he ‘*saw*’ the truth it was with his inner vision. When Christ manifested himself in this powerful vision (light, the voice of Christ) it was a spiritual not a physical vision. The companions of Paul

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didn't see or hear the physical appearance of Jesus. Paul explains that he was the only one who heard the voice.

*“And they who were with me...heard not the voice of him that spake to me. (Acts 22:6)*

#### Exaltation of Jesus

In the early church, there was no difference between the resurrection and the ascension. Both of them were connected together in the expression of ‘the exaltation’ or ‘rising up’ of Jesus. In a text written before the Gospels Paul says: *“And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also had highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name.”*

(Phil. 2:8–9)

In this passage, which may well be earliest part of the New Testament, there is no mention of the Resurrection. The words move directly from death on the cross to exaltation into heaven.

For Paul, the Jewish belief in a our own resurrection and the resurrection of Jesus were inextricably linked *“And God hath both raised up the Lord, and will also raise up us by his own power”*. *Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ?*

(1 Corinthians 6:14)

Paul never uses any of the stories which as were later developed in the Gospels to prove a miraculous resurrection. It is doubtful if Paul was aware of the empty tomb story as he doesn't mention it in his Writings. The grave would spiritually symbolize the grave of ignorance. This is the grave in which most people are buried before they hear of and accept the Word of God.

Most Bible scholars regard the empty tomb story as a much later development due to Roman influence dated from the time when more and more stories about a miraculous physical Resurrection started to circulate in the early church. It was also during that time that the Gospels were written.

If one compares Paul's experience with the appearances of the resurrected Jesus to Peter and James, one realizes that the experiences were all of a similar nature as suggested by Paul's own

words in his first letter to the Corinthians. It was a personal experience. It confirmed Peter, James and the others that Jesus was truly the Messiah, the Christ, and the Saviour who was expected by all Jews.

### **Resurrection appearances of Jesus in the Gospels**

A very different list of resurrection appearances from that of Paul's is presented in the Gospels. Also most Christians are not aware that there are many contradictions with the endings when we compare the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. A detailed study of the Bible shows how the story of the resurrection gradually unfolded from a short sentence in Mark, "*He has risen*", into a long embellished story in Luke's Gospel which was written much later.

### **The Gospel according to Mark**

Mark's Gospel is often considered to be the oldest Gospel as it was written around AD 60. Christian scholars are aware of the many contradictions in the short story given by Mark about the events that occurred after the crucifixion of Jesus.

Mark's Gospel does not tell about the event of the Resurrection itself. The story of Mark tells us about an event that occurred after the Resurrection. It tells us about a messenger, a young man, who tells a few frightened women who brought spices to anoint the body of Jesus, that Jesus was raised. This young man in white clothes asks the women to tell the apostles to go to Galilee and that there they will see Him. Mark tells us about the women: "*neither said they anything to any man for they were afraid*" (Mark15:8)

This end of the story is very surprising as there is not the usual Easter joy. It is so different from the end of the other Gospels that bring the. Because of its sad ending, for centuries the last verse wasn't read in the churches. Also they added a new ending. Scholars universally came to the conclusion that the last paragraphs of the Gospel were definitely not written by Mark but were added much later. This can be deduced from the fact that the most ancient manuscripts of Mark's Gospel do not contain the

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verses nine to twenty in Chapter sixteen. Therefore, the additional verses in which Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene, (out of whom he had cast seven devils), then in another form to the disciples, and then ascended into heaven are definitely later additions. Actually, most modern Bibles and all scholarly study Bibles now indicate in small print that the verses (Mark 16:9-20) were added later.

#### **The gospel according to Matthew**

Matthew, a Jewish scribe lived in a time of increasing hostility from Jews. Mark's gospel left many questions unanswered and He was eager to defend the Christian claims. Therefore he added, expanded and embellished Mark's narrative further fitting many images from the Old Testament into his narration. As well as writing how saints came out of their graves after Jesus' resurrection, he also introduced earthquakes, blinding light and angels into his story. He also used and adapted the story which was read in the synagogues shortly after Passover: *"And Joshua said, Roll great stones upon the mouth of the cave, and set men by it for to keep them."* (Joshua 10:18). Jews were also familiar with the story in which Daniel is put into a lion's den and a great stone is put over its entrance and is sealed by the King. But miraculously an angel had shut the lion's mouths and Daniel emerges alive. Also the description of the angel is very similar to the description of the angel in Daniel 2-9 (*"face was like lightning", garments were "glittering white", Daniel's guards were overcome with great trembling*).

However scholars pointed out that Matthew went too far in his anti-Jewish sentiments when he wrote in 27:62-66 that the chief priests and Pharisees went the next day (after the burial) to Pilate, secured guards, and placed them on duty at the tomb. This event according to Matthew took place on a Sabbath which would have been in clear violation of the rules of the Sabbath. No priest or Pharisee would have broken this most important Jewish law. That is utterly impossible.

But the most important change in Matthew's story is that outside the garden the women encounter the risen Christ. In Matthew's

story it is not the same as Mark's version "a man in white clothes" but it is Jesus Himself who gives the message: "Then said Jesus unto them, *Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me*" (Matt. 28:10)

This is the first account in written Christian history where the appearance of the risen Christ was described.

### **The Gospel according to Luke**

Another great change came with the Gospel of Luke. About forty years had passed since Paul's claim to be a witness of the resurrection. Christianity had already moved away from Jerusalem and had been preached outside of Israel. Christianity was not a Jewish movement anymore. It was a time when many Roman gentiles became Christians. The Romans were not interested in the Messiah of the Jews but they were more interested in a replacement for their gods who had miraculous powers over life and death. To adapt the Jewish message for a gentile audience and use the Roman way of thinking Luke changed the emphasis from a spiritual to a physical aspects of the Resurrection. Therefore Luke's risen Christ walks with some believers on the road of Emmaus, materializes in the midst of his apostles and eats with them.

The New Testament scholar Edward Schillebeeckx stated that this Lukan image of Christ could easily be understood by the gentiles because it was very popular in Roman mythology. In this model<sup>3</sup>, when the heroic person dies his earthly remains would disappear as he has gone to heaven. From heaven this now divine hero would regularly materialize especially to his followers. When the heroic figure returns from heaven he would be recognizably human.

Thus Luke created - for the first time - different to Mark and Matthew - an Easter narrative divided into two separate actions - separated by time. First there is the resurrection of Jesus. Forty days later is the Ascension. Between those two actions are the appearances. This change had dramatical consequences as much later it became part of the Christian calendar. Most Christians today believe that the risen Christ appeared for forty days as the physically

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resuscitated but not yet ascended Jesus. After forty days he went to heaven to prepare for his Return at the end of times.

### **Luke is also the author of the Book of Acts**

In this book Luke continues by telling stories about the missionary work of the apostles after the death of Jesus crucifixion. Luke spreads resurrection, ascension and the gift of the Spirit over a period of fifty days. This was convenient as the story culminates in a Jewish festival of Shavu'ot/Pentecost which is the anniversary of the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai Pentecost was celebrated 50 days after Pesach (Easter) or Passover in which Jews ate a Passover meal in preparation for the exodus from Egypt. There is a great similarity between the events in the time of Moses and the story told by Luke.

The Holy Bible tells us: *“And Moses ... gathered the seventy men of the elders of the people ... And the LORD came down in a cloud, and spake unto him, and took of the spirit that was upon him, and gave it unto the seventy elders: and it came to pass, that, when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied, and did not cease”* (Numbers 11:24-25 )

A similar story is told by Luke but the elders have now been replaced with the apostles: *“And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost...”* (Acts 2:4)

In this way the Jewish festival of Pentecost received a Christian meaning.

According to Luke, it was during Pentecost that Peter would proclaim to the masses the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. This proclamation is very important as it gives us some insight in the understanding of Peter. Did Peter proclaim that Jesus appeared to him in a physical body. No, definitely not. Nowhere does Peter ever mention that he was a witness of the resurrection. Instead Peter expresses the deep spiritual experience of the disciples in realizing that the crucified Jesus was indeed the Saviour, the Messiah, the Christ, who promised to be with them until the end of time.

Using the symbols which could easily be understood by the Jewish people, Peter tells us that Jesus was raised up by the power of

God and was exalted by sitting on the right hand of God. This concept was well understood by the Jews. *“He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ ... This Jesus had God raised up ... Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted ...”* (Acts 2:31–33).

Jesus was the Messiah as He was fulfilling the words of David: *“The Lord [God] said unto my Lord [Messiah], Sit thou on my right hand, until I make my foes thy footstool.”* (Acts 2:34–5)

After this proclamation three thousand Jews accepted Jesus as their Lord and were baptised. In this way the Jewish festival of Pentecost became a celebration for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In contrast to Luke, in the John’s Gospel there is no specific event called Pentecost but the risen Christ gives the Holy Spirit to the disciples. *And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost:* (John 20:22)

Also the Bahá’í Writings confirm that the apostles received the Holy Spirit to go out and teach the Message of Christ.

### **The Gospel according to St John**

The Gospel of John was written much later, about 100 AD. It is the most difficult book to date as it was written over a number of years. As it was written in different layers it reflects in many ways an early tradition. In other ways it reflects the time about twenty years after the Gospel of Luke when Christian leaders had already made a spectacular miracle of the Resurrection instead of the deeply spiritual experience of the first believers<sup>4</sup>

John’s Gospel further enhances the story of the empty tomb when he describes a race between the disciples to be the first one to reach the tomb.

Today, many Christians still believe that the apostle Thomas has doubts about the resurrection appearances. He wanted to touch the wounds of Jesus physically before he would believe. Therefore he is often called “the doubting Thomas”. Most scholars believe (as only the Gospel of John relates the "Doubting Thomas" episode) it was a reaction of the traditional church against the growing so-called “Thomas community” who believed that the resurrected Christ was a spirit - not a body. The verse at the end of the story provides an

explanation as in John 20:29 Jesus says: "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*". John used this story to prove to the growing heretic Thomas community that they were wrong..<sup>5</sup>

### **The resurrected Jesus – a new dimension**

When we study the stories in the gospels we see that the resurrected Jesus is often spoken of as a spirit, one who suddenly appeared to people, who walked over the water and straight through walls. The main idea was that people had to be empowered by Jesus to recognize Him, and that by their vision their faith was strengthened. For example in John's Gospel Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Christ but did not recognize Him until He spoke to her and called her name.

- "*And saw Jesus standing and knew not that it was Jesus.* (John 20:14)

Two believers on the road to Emmaus met Jesus and didn't recognize

*"But their eyes were holden that they should not know him."* (Luke 24:16) Finally after Jesus strengthened them to believe then their eyes were opened.

- Appearing only to a few selected ones who had faith and were able to recognize Him: "*... when they [the eleven disciples] saw Him [Christ], they worshipped Him: but some doubted.*" (Matt. 28:17). How could they doubt Him if He was standing before them in a physical body? Only those who had faith were able to see Him.

*"Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not it was Jesus."* (John 21:4) It was only after Jesus strengthened them to believe by a miraculous event (the catching of many fish) that they recognized Him.

The above examples show that the resurrected Christ was very different from the physical Jesus who had just recently died. If the appearances had been physical they would have recognized Him immediately. It was only when the disciples took the first step and tried to teach His Cause "*And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*" (Matt. 4:19) that they were divinely

assisted by Jesus Who strengthened them by His appearances and gave them courage and confidence.

*“Through the spirit of the love of God they gained a new life, and they saw Christ living, helping and protecting them. They were like drops, and they became seas; they were like feeble insects, and they became majestic eagles; they were weak and became powerful. They were like mirrors facing the sun; verily, some of the light became manifest in them”*

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Some Answered Questions, p. 106)

### **Are the days mentioned in the Bible calendar days?**

Sometimes they are but in most cases they have symbolic meanings.

For example the third day has a very special meaning. Christians commonly believe that Jesus was raised up on the third day. However, if Jesus died on Friday, then Sunday is only the second day. The reason is that *‘the third day’* has a spiritual meaning for Jews. In the Old Testament it is stated that *“In the third day he will raise us up”*. (Hosea 6:1) There are many other references to the significance of “the third day” in ancient Jewish Scriptures. For example *“for the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all people upon mount Sinai”* (Exodus 19:11) Ancient Talmudic texts of the Jewish people tell us that the general resurrection will take place at dawn following the third day after the end of the world. The third day had nothing to do with real days.

Also the fifty days is not calendar time. It is important to understand that the fifty days between Easter and Pentacost (the gift of the Holy Spirit followed by the public proclamation by Peter in Jerusalem after which three thousand people were baptised) could have been a time period of several years.

Spreading the Easter events over a much longer period had enormous consequences. Many scholars now believe that when Jesus was crucified the apostles left Jerusalem and returned back to Galilee. This makes sense as much later both Mark and Mathew would write; *“behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him”*(Matt. 28:7). (Luke’s story is very different as in his gospel the resurrection appearances happen in Jerusalem but many

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scholars believe that this is very unlikely. Who is correct? Is Luke's version or is John's version correct?. Bahá'í understanding supports John's understanding)

What happened next is difficult to determine and the debate between scholars has not led to a definite conclusion.. May-be it was when the apostles were fishing in the calm natural environment of the lake that one morning, at dawn the risen Jesus appeared to them. This would be the Easter moment in which the apostles received the absolute certainty that death could not contain their beloved Jesus who had the words of eternal life. The message was simple and the risen Christ repeated it three times when he appeared the third time according to the Gospel of John; *"If you love me you will feed my sheep"* <sup>6</sup> (John 21:14-17) The meaning of feeding the sheep is to teach His Cause.

Many scholars believe that when the apostles started to spread the joyous message about the risen Christ that they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is confirmed in John's gospel *"And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost"* (John 20:22)

Again it is Luke's Book of Acts who tells us a very different story. In Acts 2:1-4 Luke wrote that the apostles received the Gift of the Spirit Pentecost in a spectacular way (sound from heaven, cloven tongues like as of fire and speaking in several tongues) in Jerusalem.

It is with that vision of the eternal Christ that the apostles would return back to Jerusalem to spread the glorious message and establish the church of Jerusalem which originally was part of Judaism. Unfortunately historical events would take over, Jerusalem would be destroyed, the Temple of Jerusalem burned and soon the Jewish roots would be forgotten and a new Christian theology would be formulated based on evangelizing the pagan masses. At this point Judaism and Christianity parted their ways becoming separate religions. It is also the time when the Gospels were written.

#### **Conclusion from Modern Scholars**

The literal interpretation of the verses in the Bible after the death of Jesus is full of contradictions. It is impossible to reconcile all the

different stories. More and more Christians are aware of this and feel confused.

A number of Christian scholars have, based on their meticulous research published the truth about the resurrection of Jesus (see list in bibliography). This required great courage as many of them have important positions in the church. Often the traditional church would interfere and forbid them to continue their research.

However once we have removed the literal interpretation that the resurrection is a physical event which happened within a limited time period then the Easter message becomes very simple: It is the action of God who raised Jesus into the meaning of Christ, the Son of God. It means that Christ is eternal giving us hope eternal. The Easter message also contains a call to follow Him, to be like Him without fear of death as expressed in the letters of Paul.

It is estimated that at present 95% of New Testament scholars do not accept a physical resurrection as it is not supported by an in depth study of the text. The well known Protestant theologian Reinold Niebuhr summed up today's position when he wrote: *"There are very few theologians today who believe that the resurrection actually happened"* (The new Theologian, by Ved Mehta, p. 34).<sup>7</sup>

The authoritative well-respected Harper's Bible dictionary (p. 864, 1985 edition) gives the following definition of Resurrection.

*"Resurrection is to be distinguished from resuscitation or reanimation of the physical body. It denotes a complete transformation of the human being" ....*

**Faith in the resurrection is based not on empty tomb but on the appearances of the Lord.** *The word used for "appeared" is the same Greek word used elsewhere for visionary experiences. We may today characterize these experiences as revelatory disclosures from the transcendent realm. No distinction was drawn between the resurrection and ascension. The resurrections are manifestations of the resurrected and already ascended Christ from heaven"*

For most scholars the Gospel traditions are pointers to the truth. They are not the truth itself.

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These scholars are sincere truthful Christians but they do not longer carry the Easter truth in a literal framework. They gained a deeper understanding and realise that in this century the renewal of Christianity can only occur if we remove the shackles and the traditions of the past. Indeed, if Christianity is not renewed it will become irrelevant, a little sideshow in a busy world.

Bahá'í belief in the Resurrection is very similar to the belief of these scholars. Their understanding is based directly on the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'ís believe in the resurrection but their belief has moved beyond angelic messengers, empty tomb and ghostlike appearances.

Bahá'ís say;

- Yes, to Jesus who manifests God .
- Yes to the resurrection – which asserts it is the Resurrection which raised Jesus into the meaning of God.
- Yes to life after death, because one who has entered in a relationship with the eternal God has entered life eternal.

We will now end this chapter with a dialogue between a Christian and a Bahá'í about the Resurrection.

#### **Dialogue.**

**Christian:** Do you believe in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ?

**Bahá'í:** Yes, absolutely. *“Such is the meaning of the resurrection of Christ, and this was a true resurrection. But as the clergy have neither understood the meaning of the Gospels nor comprehended the symbols, therefore, it has been said that religion is in contradiction with science, and science in opposition to religion”.* (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Some Answered Questions, p. 105)

I believe in the Resurrection exactly as is written in the earliest testimony which we find in the letters of Paul. Paul spoke of resurrection as spiritual event. The Risen Christ was a spiritual body. *Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit*

*the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. (1 Cor 15:50)*

For Paul there was not a two stage process in which Jesus first came back to earth (the Resurrection) and than forty days later from earth to heaven (the Ascension). For Paul, God raised Jesus from death to sit at right hand of God. The resurrection appearances show how Jesus kept working to build His church. For Paul, the body of Christ became the church itself.

Paul affirms the resurrection was real. Without the resurrection the teachings of Christianity are in vain. Paul wrote: “*But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain*” (1 Corinthians 15:13-14)

**Christian:** What does it mean to you: “Christ is risen”?

**Bahá’í:** We believe that the risen Christ has a spiritual significance.

The Bible tells us “*For Christ ... being put to death in the flesh, but quickened [made alive] by the Spirit ...*” (1 Peter 3:18)

The gradual development of the Easter experience is over a long period. But first there was the resurrection experience. When Jesus was arrested and crucified the apostles fled in fear. This fear was removed when the apostles saw the resurrected Christ. To quote from the Bahá’í Writings: “*they saw Christ living, helping and protecting them.*”

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Some Answered Questions p. 107).

Bahá’ís do not deny the Resurrection. The Bahá’í Faith explains that the Resurrection has both earthly and heavenly manifestations. For us, Christ's Resurrection was real, it was important, and without it Christianity becomes meaningless.<sup>8</sup>

**Christian:** I am happy to hear that Bahá’ís believe that *the apostles saw Jesus*. This is the most important for me. But what is the real proof of the resurrection for you?

**Bahá’í:** In the Bahá’í Faith the greatest objective proof for the resurrection is the fact that the teachings of Christ were not dead and buried after His crucifixion but that His Words live on and His influence has circled the globe and influenced mankind.

Spiritual meaning of the Resurrection

‘Abdu’l-Bahá said: *“Recollect that Christ, solitary and alone, without a helper or protector, without armies and legions, and under the greatest oppression, uplifted the standard of God before all the people of the world, and withstood them, and finally conquered all, although outwardly He was crucified. Now this is a veritable miracle which can never be denied. There is no need of any other proof of the truth of Christ”*

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 101)

**Christian:** I always thought that Bahá’ís did not believe in the resurrection but now I can see that this is not the case.

**Bahá’í:** Yes we do believe in the Resurrection. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us the story of what happened with the disciples at the time.

*“After the death of Christ the disciples were troubled, and their ideas and thoughts were discordant and contradictory; later they became firm and united, and at the feast of Pentecost they gathered together and detached themselves from the things of this world. Disregarding themselves, they renounced their comfort and worldly happiness, sacrificing their body and soul to the Beloved, abandoning their houses, and becoming wanderers and homeless, even forgetting their own existence. Then they received the help of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit became manifested; the spirituality of Christ triumphed, and the love of God reigned. They were given help at that time and dispersed in different directions, teaching the Cause of God, and giving forth proofs and evidences.*

*So the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles means their attraction by the Christ Spirit, whereby they acquired stability and firmness. Through the spirit of the love of God they gained a new life, and they **saw Christ living, helping and protecting them.***

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Some Answered Questions, p. 106)