

**A FRIENDLY GUIDE TO**

# THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS



**FRANCIS J MOLONEY SDB**

# CONTENTS

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR 3

NOTES ON THE ARTWORK 3

INTRODUCTION 4

CHAPTER ONE:

THE EARLIEST WITNESSES 8

Primitive Confessions of Faith 8

1 Corinthians 15:3-8 9

CHAPTER TWO:

THE GOSPELS: BORN IN THE  
RESURRECTION 12

CHAPTER THREE:

THE GOSPEL OF MARK 15

Women at the Tomb 16

The Easter Proclamation 16

Failure 17

Promises fulfilled 18

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW 19

Women at the Tomb 20

The Guard's Report 21

Commissioning 21

At the end of the age 23

CHAPTER FIVE:

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 26

Women at the Tomb 27

The Journey to Emmaus 28

Commissioning 30

Ascension 31

To the ends of the earth 31

CHAPTER SIX:

TWO STORIES IN THE GOSPEL  
OF JOHN 32

JOHN 20 33

Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter,  
and the Beloved Disciple 33

The Beloved Disciple's Journey of  
Faith 33

Mary Magdalene's Journey of  
Faith 34

Commissioning 35

Thomas' Journey of Faith 35

The First Conclusion 36

Believing without seeing 36

A MAJOR FEAST DAY FOR  
MARY MAGDALENE 37

JOHN 21 38

A Fishing Miracle 39

Peter and the Beloved Disciple  
40

John's Second Conclusion 42

A new commandment 42

CHAPTER SEVEN:

WHAT HAPPENED? 43

The Empty Tomb 43

The Appearances 44

God is at work 44

CHAPTER EIGHT:

WHAT DOES THE RESURRECTION  
OF JESUS MEAN? 45

For Jesus 45

For Jesus' Followers 45

We live in the faith 46

REFERENCES 48

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Shane Conroy is an Australian artist living in Mexico and a former Art Director for Dove Communications in the early 1980s. He designed the award-winning publication 'Woman: First Among the Faithful' by Frank Moloney in 1985.

## NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

For some years Garratt Publishing has issued a series of books under the rubric of *A Friendly Guide*. They have proved to be extremely helpful, and point to the urgent need for the Catholic Church to respond to the exhortations of the Second Vatican Council, and Church leadership since then: *to recognise that the Word of God must be at the centre of Christian life and practice*. Although a number of the books have been dedicated to issues central to the life of the Catholic Church (Prayer, the Mass, Vatican II), the majority have focused upon the Word of God (the Old Testament, the Prophets, the New Testament, Jesus, the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke,

and John, and the Letters of Paul). This series speaks directly to the non-specialist reader, is attractively designed, and each brief volume provides up-to-date information in an easily digestible bite-size. I trust what follows continues that tradition.

The present volume, *A Friendly Guide to the Resurrection of Jesus*, reflects upon the very foundation of the Christian Tradition. Although its major interest is in the witness of the earliest Church to the resurrection, it also asks what happened, and what those inspired witnesses might say to Christians today. Much of what follows is guided by my *The Resurrection of the Messiah. A Narrative Commentary on the*

*Resurrection Accounts in the Four Gospels* (Mahwah/New York: Paulist Press, 2013). The biblical text used is the NRSV translation, except for a few places where I have offered my own translation. That is always indicated with the abbreviation AT (author's translation). This *Friendly Guide* attempts to reach all Christians who accept that the resurrection of Jesus is the bedrock of their Christian faith, life, and practice. This message retains its power and continues to give meaning to what we hold dear.

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Melbourne, Victoria, Australia*

## NOTES ON THE ARTWORK



The artwork for this book encompasses many symbols of the resurrection.

The ancient Palm (palmette) symbol has a very direct relationship to Christ and was used by the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans and in India.

So too was the lotus, seen since ancient times as a symbol of resurrection and renewal because it closes with the dark and opens with the sunrise, growing with great beauty from the mud of the lake.

The illustration on page 48 features the symbol of Constantine's Chi Rho with Jesus as Christ the light. The signs 'alpha' and 'omega' signify the beginning and the end.

Around Jesus are significant people represented in the Gospels showing their feelings of awe; the two women at the tomb, the young man, two disciples and Peter bringing bread to the table. The fishermen who witnessed the miracle of the fish are also represented.

Shane says: "Apart from

imagining the awe that the apostles and the others must have experienced, I tried to contemplate what Jesus himself must have experienced ... almost impossible to imagine his joy. I have tried to put the focus on the experiences/reactions of the 'witnesses' rather than on the image of Jesus. That's why he is there in the middle but with his back to us too".

The whole image is surrounded by a mosaic type border common from ancient Roman days.



## INTRODUCTION

**P**ractising Christians take it for granted that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and subsequently, after three days, raised by God from the dead. This certainty is not shared by millions of people who belong to other religious traditions, or who have no religious commitment.

Our secularised world, outstandingly represented by contemporary Australian culture, regards such claims by Christians as unrealistic; people simply do not rise from the dead.

For the ancients, rhythms of nature (the stars, the moon, the seasons of the year, and the cycle of plant life) are marked by birth, life, death, burial, and rebirth. Is it possible that Christianity has adopted

some of those ancient “myths” that explain the world and its cycles and applied it to Jesus of Nazareth?

Many have made this suggestion, respecting Christianity, but not on the basis of the physical resurrection of its founder. Some modern critical scholarship, even on the basis of the New Testament evidence itself, argues that the proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection was inspired by an ongoing experience of Jesus within the community, not by a physical phenomenon. But the physical resurrection of Jesus remains a pillar of Christian faith. As St Paul stated in 54 CE: “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (1 Cor 15:14).

The pages that follow are not

written *to convince* others that Jesus was indeed raised by God, but *to affirm* the depth and the beauty of Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus. I am fully aware of the complex nature of the early Church’s description and understanding of Jesus’ departure from the human stage. Among Christians, however, the rich historical, literary, and theological complexity surrounding the first expressions [of the resurrection] in the pages of the New Testament receives too little attention. We just state what we believe and ask no further questions. We need to go further. Although the historical reality of an empty tomb deserves our attention, belief in the resurrection is founded upon the faith of the earliest Church, not a hole in the ground.

That witness is not very concerned with *what happened to Jesus*. The earliest Christians took it for granted that God entered the life and death of Jesus, with unconditional acceptance of Jesus' radical obedience to his Father. God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. As we will see, all the earliest confessions

of faith in the resurrection of Jesus affirm this truth: God raised Jesus. While we traditionally say: "Jesus rose from the dead," the earliest witnesses claim: "God raised Jesus

from the dead." The resurrection of Jesus is a world-questioning action of God that took place in history, even though it defies history. On the basis of that unshakeable belief, the earliest Christians proclaimed, in their preaching (St Paul) and in their narratives (the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John), *what happened to the believers because of Jesus' resurrection*.

The *Friendly Guide to the Resurrection of Jesus* will trace the historical development of the early Church's confession of faith in the resurrection of Jesus. Prior to the life, teaching, and death of Jesus of Nazareth, the question of belief in the resurrection from the dead has an interesting history. For centuries Jewish writings show little or no interest in an afterlife. God's blessings were reflected in the prosperity of a life well-lived (Psalms 16:9-10; 73:23-26; 104:27-30; Mal 3:13-21). In the centuries immediately prior to Jesus, as Israel experienced suffering and subordination to powerful nations, the idea of an afterlife emerged. Why do the good suffer, and the wicked prosper? For some an afterlife would be a restoration of the

dead person's physical condition (2 Macc 7:1-42), for others it would be a more spiritual experience (Wisdom 3:1-9). Jesus of Nazareth and the earliest Church accepted this new Jewish doctrine: there would be a life after death. The nature of that life would be determined by the quality

of a person's life before death (Mark 12:18-27; Matt 22:23-33; Luke 20:27-38). For all the versatility this developing Jewish doctrine had in the time of Jesus, *it does not*

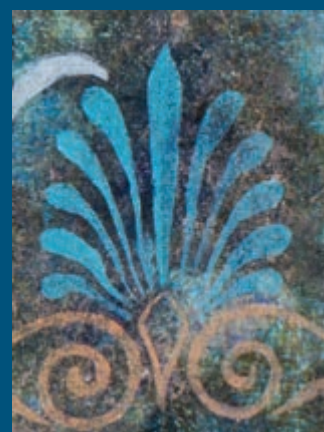
*concern us*. **The resurrection of Jesus is not about the possibility of life after death. It is about the belief that a man who was cruelly executed, and buried, was experienced as alive, witnessed to by many.**

Our earliest witnesses come from the time before St Paul, who wrote across the 50s of the first Christian century. We have them because they came to life as brief exclamations and confessions of faith in the resurrection that have been incorporated into later documents. They come from the first years of the existence of a believing Christian community. From there we turn to examine Paul's recalling the central place of the resurrection of Jesus for the community at Corinth, found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. Remarkably, Paul shows little concern for the events that marked Jesus' life and ministry. No doubt he was aware of them, but at this early stage of the life of the Christian community, and in its preaching, he focuses entirely upon the saving significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

"We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those

Our secularised world, outstandingly represented by contemporary Australian culture, regards such claims by Christians as unrealistic; people simply do not rise from the dead.

**F**or the ancients, rhythms of nature (the stars, the moon, the seasons of the year, and the cycle of plant life) are marked by birth, life, death, burial, and rebirth. Is it possible that Christianity has adopted some of those ancient "myths" that explain the world and its cycles, and applied it to Jesus of Nazareth?





who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:23-24).

Writing in 54 CE, Paul reminds the Corinthians of something he taught them, but which he himself received in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. We are dealing with a very ancient witness to the resurrection faith of the Church, earlier than Paul's conversion, which most likely took place in early 30 CE. It was not until about 70 CE that the earliest Gospel writer (the Gospel of Mark) began to "tell a story" about the resurrection. This story was retold in what later came to be accepted as the Christian Scriptures by the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (in late 80 CE), and eventually in the Gospel of John (about 100 CE).

Nourished by this rich reflection upon the faith that was born of the resurrection of Jesus, expressed through our inspired Sacred Scriptures, we will then be in a position to ask some questions about what we can discover about what happened on that first Easter

morning, and what the resurrection of Jesus means for us today. We cannot be sure of the exact names of all of the authors behind the writings of earliest Christianity. There is no doubt that Paul of Tarsus, an earlier persecutor of Christians and one of its most creative theologians, wrote the First Letter to the Corinthians. The names given to the authors of the

"We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:23-24).

Gospels became part of the tradition late in the second century, as the Four Gospels were described as "according to" Mark, Matthew, Luke and John.

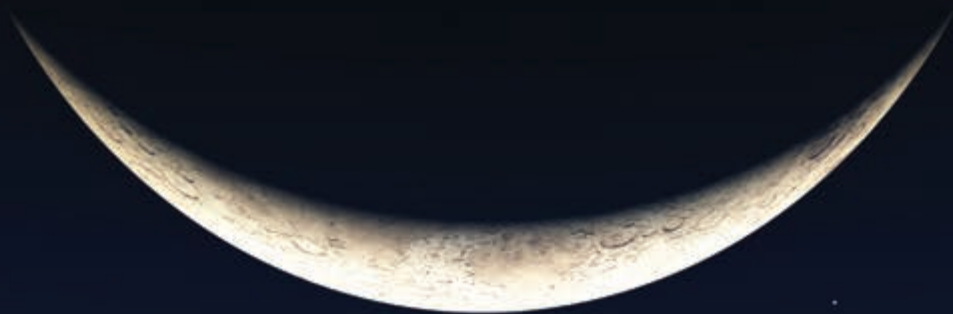

This step was taken because of the tendency, at that time, to compose a life of Jesus that "blended" all four Gospels. That

tendency had to be resisted, as Christians understood that each of the Evangelists told the story *in a different way*. **Each of these inspired, but different, stories of Jesus enrich our understanding of who Jesus was, and what God has done for us in and through him. So it will always be, as we respond to the challenge of our Risen Lord. Each Easter we proclaim, along with the Greek-speaking Church: "Christ has been raised!" (Christos anēsti!), and respond "He has been raised indeed!" (Alēthōs anēsti!).**

A famous twentieth-century scholar (Rudolf Bultmann) once said that Jesus rises again and again in that proclamation. Many rejected his claim, as it revealed a deep scepticism about the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus. But his suggestion contains an important element of truth: in our Easter proclamation we recognise the "truth" of the fundamental claim of the Christian tradition: Jesus, our Lord, is alive and among us.

## SUMMING UP

- ✦ From its first days the Christian communities affirmed that Jesus had been raised by God.
- ✦ Paul does not tell the "story of Jesus", but focuses intensely upon the significance of the death and the resurrection of Jesus.
- ✦ The early Church did not proclaim that Jesus had risen, but that God has raised Jesus.
- ✦ The major concern of the Gospel narratives about the resurrection is what the event meant for the disciples, rather than what it meant for Jesus.



**A**s St Paul stated in 54 CE: "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain."

And so each week as we gather for mass we confidently stand and proclaim the Nicene Creed.  
We say:

"For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."



## CHAPTER ONE

# THE EARLIEST WITNESSES

It is sometimes thought that Paul was the earliest witness to the Christian tradition. Paul is certainly the author of the earliest *written* documents that we have in our New Testament. But he was initially a persecutor of the Christians (Gal 1:13, 23; Phil 3:6; 1 Cor 15:9).

The intervention of God led him to recognise that Jesus of Nazareth's death and resurrection had created an entirely new possibility for all humankind (Rom 5:12-21). Paul was overwhelmed by "the power of his resurrection" (Phil 3:10, Gal 1:13-24; Phil 3:7-11; 1 Cor 1:18; 2 Cor 4:7; 12:9; 13:4). This experience is recounted three times in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9:1-30; 22:3-21; 26:9-23), but Paul's own witness to the "newness" that has transformed his life is most impressive.

### Primitive Confessions of Faith

We cannot be sure of the details of the instruction that the former zealous Jew received as a new Christian, but Galatians 1:17-18 and Acts 9:19b-30; 11:25-26 indicate that he spent some time away from the missionary activity of the earliest community before he burst upon the scene. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, written in 54 CE, Paul warns his enthusiastic new converts about some of their practices. He tells them what Jesus did at a meal with his disciples on the night before he died, and the events that marked Jesus' resurrection. In both instructions, Paul informs the Corinthians that he is passing on to them what he himself received from those earliest Christians who had

instructed him (1 Cor 11:23; 15:3). Paul passes on a *tradition* that is earlier than his conversion, which we can most likely date in early 31 CE, only a year or so after the death of Jesus in 30 CE.

Careful attention to Paul's writing shows that he made his own a number of what we call pre-Pauline expressions of faith. The expression "pre-Pauline" is used to indicate that they go back to the very beginnings of the Christians' attempts to articulate what they believed. A sign of this can be found in the regular use of the expressions "proclaim" ... "believe" ... "confess" ... "that" (Phil 2:11; Rom 10:8b-9; 1 Thess 4:14).

And every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil 2:11).

The word of faith which we proclaim; because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom 10:8b-9).

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died (1 Thess 4:14).

The affirmation of the death and resurrection of Jesus as constituting his Lordship came to Paul from his earliest days as a Christian. Other pre-Pauline formulae can be sensed behind the following Pauline affirmations, all taken from the Letter to the Romans, Paul's most systematic explanation of his version of the "good news" of what God had done in and through Jesus:

It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our

Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification (Rom 4:24-25).

It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God (Rom 8:34).

For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living (Rom 14:9).

A feature of these selected ancient witnesses is the dominant role of God who raises Jesus from the dead, and God's subsequent establishment of Jesus as Lord. Scholars have identified many such passages (Rom 6:4, 9; 7:4; 8:11; 1 Cor 6:14; 15:15; 2 Cor 4:14; 5:15; 1 Thess 1:10). These earliest passages, which originated in the preaching of the pre-Pauline Church, insist that God intervened into the death of the man called "Jesus" (1 Thess 1:10), and empowered him as "Lord" (1 Cor 6:14), and "Christ" (1 Cor 15:15).

**We customarily use the name "Jesus Christ" as if that was Jesus' regular name. Of course it was not, as to call Jesus of Nazareth "the Christ" is to honour him as the Messiah. But for a well-instructed Paul, this honour was taken for granted. He had no hesitation in using "Jesus Christ" as the name for Jesus of Nazareth.** Guided by the Spirit, he had been convinced by those who went before him of the truth of "the gospel concerning his Son who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Christ our Lord" (Rom 1:3-4).



## 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

The pre-Pauline indications of the faith of the earliest Christians, and its proclamation, are brief statements. No doubt there were many such faith-filled exclamations that also formed part of the earliest preaching that have not come down to us in a written form. They impressed Paul so much that he made some of them his own, and he thus preserves for us some of our most ancient confessions of faith in the risen Jesus.

But there is a unique pre-Pauline passage that performs a rare function in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: it tells the story of Jesus' death, resurrection, and appearances (1 Cor 15:3-8). Paul rarely indulges in what we call "narrative", or "stories." But in his

instruction of the Corinthians who are misunderstanding the meaning of Paul's teaching on resurrection, he begins by reminding them of Jesus' resurrection by telling them a story impregnated with elements from the tradition. The expressions used in the passage continue the style of the earliest confessions.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received (v. 3a):

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures (v.3b),

and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures (v. 4),

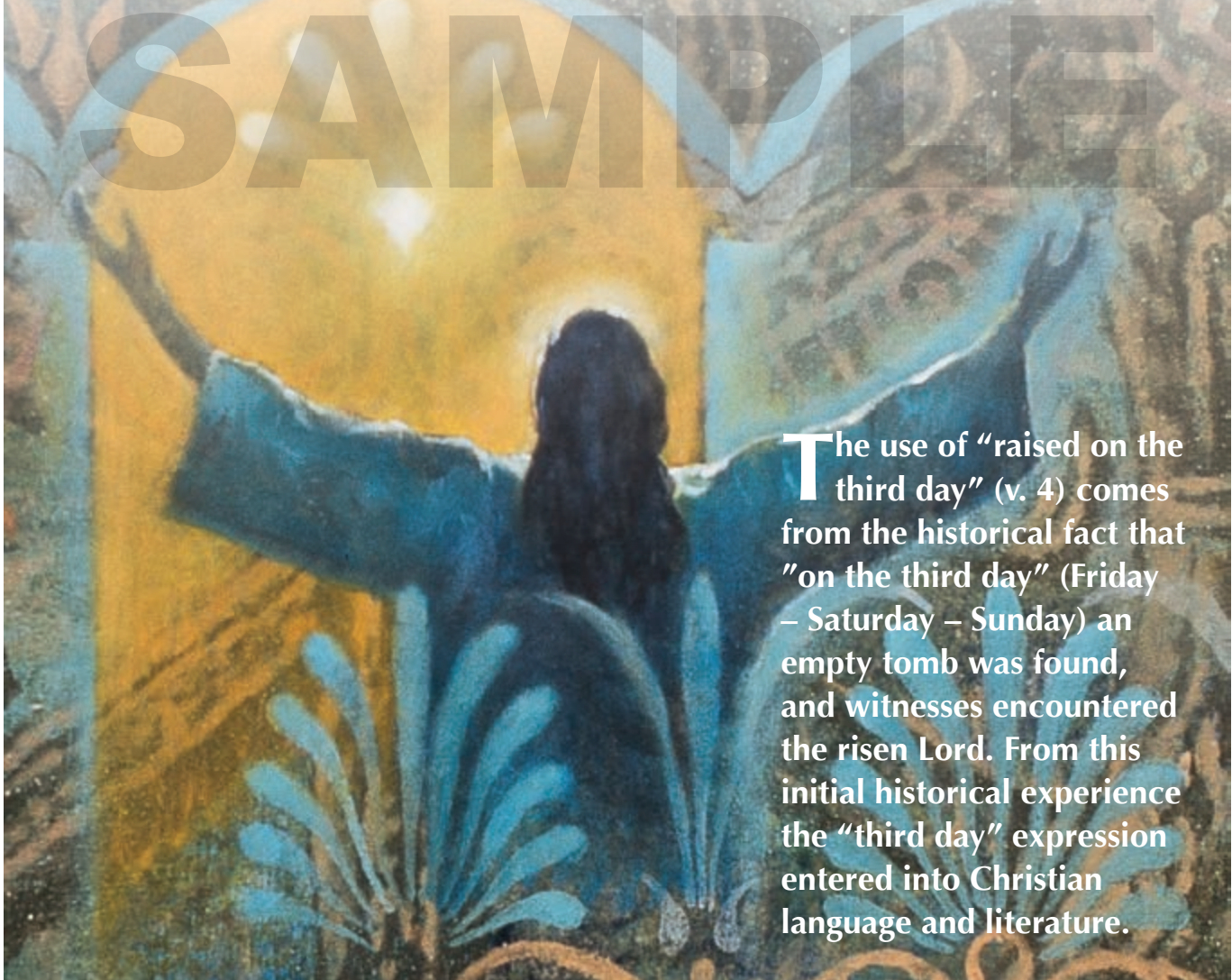
and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve (v. 5).

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died (v. 6).

Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles (v. 7).

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me (v. 8).

Paul opens his narrative by insisting upon the fact that what he is passing on to the Corinthians came to him from the earliest Christian tradition. In a parallel use of the story of the Last Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, he claims that such traditions are "from the Lord" (v. 23). This is a matter "of first importance" (15:3a). He then takes up a pre-Pauline traditional confession of faith. It runs as far as v. 5. It is easily identified by



The use of "raised on the third day" (v. 4) comes from the historical fact that "on the third day" (Friday – Saturday – Sunday) an empty tomb was found, and witnesses encountered the risen Lord. From this initial historical experience the "third day" expression entered into Christian language and literature.



**The “story” told in vv. 3b-5 reaches back to the first weeks and months after the death of Jesus. Even at that early stage, it is clear that the Christians were not primarily interested in the facts of the death, the burial, the resurrection, and the appearances. Jesus’ death was “for our sins”, and “in accordance with the scriptures” (v. 3b). His being raised was “in accordance with the scriptures” (v. 4b). It took place “on the third day” (v. 4). His appearances were experiences that gave birth to faith in Jesus as the founding figure of the Christian community (v. 5). On that basis, Paul can continue the story, indicating the origins of those who have received authority as witnesses (v. 6) and apostles (vv. 7-8).**

the rhythmic use of the word “that”, so important in confessions of faith, followed by what is confessed:

- ✚ *that* Christ died (v. 3b)
- ✚ *that* he was buried (v. 4a)
- ✚ *that* he was raised (v. 4b)
- ✚ *that* he appeared (v. 5)

The remaining verses in the narrative (vv. 6-8) tell of the appearances of the Risen Jesus to a large group of Christian brethren, James, the apostles, and finally, to Paul. These verses come from Paul’s own pen and serve to link the bedrock traditional confessions of vv. 3b-5 to his own mission as an apostle. However, he is bold enough to affirm that there are some still alive who have experienced the risen Lord. If anyone doubts what has been claimed in vv. 3b-5, then they can have first-hand witness from those to whom Jesus appeared who are still alive, even though some are dead (v. 6). They can also find such witness with James, the apostles, and finally, from Paul the apostle (vv. 7-8). He then develops the theme of his apostolic authority in vv. 9-11. Such authority grounds the teaching he will share with the Corinthian community about the *fact* of the resurrection of the dead (vv. 12-34), and the *nature* of risen life (vv. 35-53).

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were experiences that gave birth to faith in Jesus as the founding figure of the Christian community (v. 5). On that basis, Paul can continue the story, indicating the origins of those who have received authority as witnesses (v. 6) and apostles (vv. 7-8).

Much scholarly discussion surrounds the detail of this early confession of 1 Corinthians 15:3b-5. Jesus’ death for our sins has its theological roots in the early identification of Jesus’ suffering and death with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (Isa 53:4-6), and the recent Jewish understanding of the deaths of the Maccabean martyrs as “for the people” (2 Macc 7:37-38; 4 Macc 6:27; 17:22; 18:4). The claim that his death (v. 3b) and his resurrection (v. 4) are the fulfilment of scripture has its origins in the life and teaching of Jesus. He looked back to the image of “one like a son of man” in Daniel 7:13-14 and regularly called himself “the Son of Man”. Daniel wrote of the suffering and ultimate vindication and victory of God for the holy ones of the most high: the faithful people of Israel. Jesus applied the expression to himself as “the Son of Man”, thus using the Prophet Daniel as the “scripture” that pointed forward to his own suffering, forthcoming death, and vindication by God. The earliest tradition saw that this Scripture, used by Jesus himself, had been fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Finally, the use of “raised on the third day” (v. 4) comes from the historical fact that “on the third day” (Friday – Saturday – Sunday) an empty tomb was found, and witnesses encountered the risen Lord. From this initial historical experience the “third day” expression entered into Christian language and literature.

Almost immediately after the earliest Church experienced the risen Jesus, they began to develop an understanding of *what it meant*.



The death of Jesus had, in some way, atoned for sin. The death and resurrection of Jesus were not an “accident”. They fulfilled the scriptures, as Jesus had prophesied. In this way his death and resurrection continued God’s plan for the perfection of God’s loving and saving presence to Israel, and to the whole world. Jesus’ appearances did not take place to “prove” anything. They established a divinely instituted authority; God has broken into history, and established a new order. This is what was meant in the early Church when they cried out: “Jesus is Lord!” A new community and a new age began with the presence of the risen Jesus.

Some two thousand years later, believing Christians are able to resonate with these earliest confessions of belief in God’s action in and through Jesus, whose loving

self-gift in death forgives sin. We continue to experience the Lordship of the risen Christ, as we live in the graced time of the Church, and await the final coming of the Son of Man. Paul developed his splendid

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understanding of the significance of what God has done for us in and through Jesus’ death and resurrection

on the basis of these truths. Paul rightly understands the bloody event of Jesus’ death as the perfect response of obedience to God, reversing the disobedience that marked the beginnings of the biblical story in the Book of Genesis. God’s raising Jesus from the dead establishes him as Messiah and Lord. **We live within the graced world of a “new creation” yet still await the final coming of our Messiah and Lord at the end of all time. Both living a Christian life within the community and waiting for the end-time can be called “eschatological”. Jesus’ death and resurrection generate a “new creation” (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17) already marked by God’s presence as Jesus is *now* our Christ and Lord, but the perfection of all creation in God’s definitive Lordship *lies ahead of us* (1 Thess 1:10; Rom 8:18-25).**

## SUMMING UP

- ✚ Paul did not create his interpretation of the death and resurrection, but developed it on the basis of the earliest Christians’ confessions of faith.
- ✚ These earliest confessions of faith are easily identifiable, reflecting what was originally a spoken proclamation, or an enthusiastic expression of faith.
- ✚ All the earliest witnesses insist upon the action of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, establishing him as Messiah and Lord.
- ✚ One of Paul’s very few narratives came to him from pre-Pauline tradition. It is found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, expanded by Paul in vv. 7-8, and affirms the basic truths about the resurrection of Jesus.
- ✚ From its earliest times, beginning “on the third day”, the members of the Christian community did not overly concern themselves with what happened to Jesus at the resurrection; they sought to explain what it means for humankind.
- ✚ Paul based himself upon earliest Christian faith and developed his foundational and inspired profound Theology and Christology across his Letters.