

“ ... BUT SOME DOUBTED.” (Matt. 28:17)
A RE-APPRAISAL OF FACTORS INFLUENCING THE EASTER
FAITH OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

E. Margaret Howe*

There is a certain ambiguity in the New Testament Documents concerning the nature of the resurrection body of Jesus and concerning the way in which it was perceived by the early Christian community. In describing the appearance of Jesus to the Eleven in Galilee, Matthew states, without any elucidating comment, “When they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted” (28:17). The qualification, “but some doubted” is significant. Presumably they doubted that it was Jesus. Why? Were they not sure that there was anyone there at all? Or did they see the form of a man but not recognize that it was Jesus? Or did they simply mistrust their eyes? (They possessed after all no categories which would make a post-resurrection appearance ‘receivable.’) Matthew does not comment that their doubts were allayed, unless he intends the following phrase, “And Jesus came ...” to imply that. This phrase itself poses a problem. Did the Eleven “see” and “worship” Jesus before he came to them? The use of the participle (*proselthōn*) suggests that his “coming” and the commissioning of the disciples took place at the same time. The commission ends, “I am with you always.” Matthew has no “ascension” narrative. The implication of this resurrection narrative is that as the Eleven experienced the presence of Jesus on the mountain in Galilee, so they would continue to experience his presence, until the close of the age.

The element of uncertainty in the recognition of the resurrection body of Jesus features also in Luke’s resurrection narratives. It is most obvious in his account of the appearance to the disciples of Emmaus.¹ The reader is persuaded that the stranger who walks with the disciples in the late afternoon is Jesus, but the disciples themselves are under the force of some strange supernatural power which holds them back from active recognition of his presence.² “Their eyes were kept from recognising him” (24:16). The moment when their eyes were “opened” coincided precisely with the moment when he “vanished out of their sight.” Luke does not say whether their recognition of Jesus came from viewing his physical form. Their own description of the incident to the Jerusalem disciples is that he was known to them “in the breaking of the

*Assistant Professor of Religion, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky. This paper was read at the South Sectional Meeting of the ETS at Montreat Anderson College, Montreat, N.C.

¹For a detailed treatment of this narrative see Arnold Ehrhardt, “The Disciples of Emmaus,” NTS 10 pp. 182-201.

²The disciples are subjected to a supranatural power; their eyes are held (v. 16); they are stayed on their way (*estathēsan*); and finally their eyes are opened (v. 31)... It will have to be established who was acting here.” Ehrhardt, *Op. Cit.* p. 184.

bread." Only upon reflection can they revel in the enjoyment of his presence with them on the road, "while he opened to us the scriptures" (24:32). There is every indication that these disciples knew Jesus during this earthly life, but no indication that they came to believe he was living through visual recognition of his bodily form.

If we may rest any weight of opinion on the Longer Ending of Mark's gospel, "After this he appeared *in another form* to two of them ..." (16:2), then we are presented with the possibility that the resurrection body of Jesus differed from one occasion to another. In this case the implication is not simply that his present form differed from that of his earthly body, but that it differed from that of the resurrection body in which he appeared to Mary Magdalene.

The narrative which follows in Luke poses further problems concerning recognition of Jesus. Here the disciples looked directly at Jesus and were invited to touch him. Yet here too an element of doubt enters into the experience—

"They were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit." (24:37)

"And while they still disbelieved for joy ..." (24:41)

So the lack of recognition by the Emmaus disciples was not necessarily occasioned by the fact that they did not see his form. It might have been that their viewing of his form was not accompanied by other phenomena which would have lead them to interpret what they saw.

John begins his resurrection narratives with an encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. She mistook him for the gardener. Why? Blinded by grief, did she not at first register his appearance? And did she eventually turn and look because she recognized his *voice*? (20:16). One might conclude that her initial comprehension that Jesus was alive came from hearing the sound of his voice rather than from seeing his physical form. She was not permitted to touch him (v. 17). Her comment to the others was, "I have seen the Lord." The appearance to the Twelve in John suggests that they needed the added proof of viewing the wounds of Jesus (20:20) and is followed by another incident involving this with Thomas. In the Sea of Tiberias narrative, the first recognition of Jesus is made by the "disciple whom Jesus loved," and Peter rushed to the shore because he "*heard* that it was the Lord" (21:7), rather than because he recognized the form of Jesus. Then follows the statement—"Now none of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord" (21:12). Why would the necessity for questioning be entertained if the physical appearance of Jesus was convincing proof of his person?³

From this brief revue of the resurrection narratives, it is clear that sense perception was one avenue through which the early Christian community became convinced that Jesus was alive. They saw him, they heard his voice, and they touched him. But it is also apparent that sense

³For detailed comment on these resurrection narratives see C. H. Dodd, *More New Testament Studies*, pp. 102-133.

perception *alone* was not adequate to convince the early Christian community that Jesus was alive—some saw but doubted. We must therefore investigate other factors which may have given rise to the Easter faith.

There is in the first place the possibility that Jesus ~~during~~ during his earthly ministry had *taught his disciples that he would die and that he would rise again*. This would imply a *Sitz im Leben Jesu* for the passion and resurrection predictions.⁴ The option suggests itself in the constant re-iteration of the "as he told you" theme. In Mark we read "He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you" (16:7); in Luke, "remember how he told you" (24:6), "and they remembered his words" (24:44); and in Matthew, "he has risen as he said" (28:6). Did the remembrance of this teaching inspire the faith necessary for the ardent conviction that Jesus was alive?

A second possibility is that this faith was closely linked with the encounter with Jesus experienced in *the eucharist*. A reading of certain resurrection narratives leaves the impression of a close link between communal meal and apprehension of the presence of the resurrected Christ. This is most strongly evidenced in the Emmaus narrative (Lk. 24:13-35): "He took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him"; "They told ... how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread."⁵ A similar idea is expressed in the gospel of John: "Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you.' They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish" (21:12-13). The Longer Ending of Mark reads, "He appeared to the Eleven themselves as they sat at the table" (16:14). Was the reality of the promise, "Where two or three of you are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst" (Matt. 18:20) so deeply realized in the community of the disciples, and particularly in the eucharist, that it convinced them that he was alive?

A third possibility is that the Easter faith arose from contemplation of the significance of the death of Jesus in the light of *the Hebrew Scriptures*.⁶ Luke's resurrection narratives in particular suggest the importance of this option. The answer to the Emmaus disciples' despairing comment: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel," is a straightforward rebuke, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe *all that the prophets have spoken*" (24:25). Such rebuke is only justifiable if we are to assume that the disciples could have come to the

⁴e.g. Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34.

⁵The narrative which follows also includes the eating motif (Lk. 24:36-43). Cf. Acts 1:4, "While eating with them (*sunalizomenos*) he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem"; Acts 10:40-41, "God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, *who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.*"

⁶Cf. Irwin Reist, "The Old Testament Basis for the Resurrection Faith," EQ Vol. XLIII No. 1 Jan.-March 1971.

conclusion that the death of Jesus was not the end of their hopes (and that he would rise again?) *solely through intelligent* (or perhaps 'inspired'?) *study of the Hebrew Scriptures*. The stranger's manner implies a slight impatience that the two had not already arrived at the 'easter faith' even though they had not experienced an 'easter appearance.'⁷ A period of instruction follows—

“And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (24:27).

This reference to all three sections of *Tanakh* seems to imply that the totality of these 'books' had reference to Christ and the significance of his sufferings, rather than that one particular 'prophetic line' was being followed. The comment of the disciples afterwards was—

“Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” (24:32).

Their return to Jerusalem becomes the scene of another appearance of Jesus, again having at its core teaching concerning the Messiah from the Hebrew Scriptures (24:44). In the Fourth Gospel there is a comment made concerning 'the other disciple' who ran with Peter to see the empty tomb—

“Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (20:8-9).

We are left with the questions, what did he believe? and why the observation that *as yet* they did not know the scripture that he must rise from the dead? Is John implying that the sight of the empty tomb brought *initial* belief in the resurrection to this disciple, whereas for others such belief involved enlightened understanding of the scriptures?⁸ Certainly it implies that their knowledge of “the scripture” added something to their understanding of the resurrection of Christ.⁹

Finally, there are indications that a close connection exists between the appearances of the risen Christ and *the commissioning of the disciples to a specific task*. The Matthaean narrative of the appearance to the Eleven consists *mainly* of a statement made by Jesus concerning the nature and extent of their future ministry, “Go therefore and make disciples of all

⁷A similar tone of reproof is found in the Longer Ending of Mark, “He upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen” (Mk. 16:14). Here the implication is that they might have been expected to believe solely on the basis of the experience of others.

⁸The result of *post-resurrection* teaching or study?

⁹What were the scriptures which indicated so clearly that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead? We may assume they included the ones used most frequently by the early Christian community. In particular we find reference to: Ps. 110:1; 118:22; 2:1-2, 7; 16:8-11; Is. 53.

Concerning the origin of this re-interpretation of Hebrew prophecy in the light of the ministry of Jesus there are several possibilities, and they are not necessarily exclusive: a) that Jesus taught this during his earthly ministry, b) that the disciples grasped this only after the crucifixion forced them to re-evaluate the role of the Messiah, c) that Jesus taught this during his resurrection appearances, d) that it was a line of thought which developed gradually as Christian leaders sought to convey the significance of the 'Christ event' to new converts.

nations ... baptising ... teaching ..." (28:19-20).¹⁰ Similarly, the appearance to the Eleven in the Longer Ending of Mark (16:15-18). The final Lukan appearance includes the commissioning of the disciples as witnesses who are to preach repentance and forgiveness to all nations (24:46-49). In John's gospel the account of the first appearance to the disciples includes the commission, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you ..." (20:21); and the final chapter of the gospel includes a more personalized commission to Peter (21:15-19). One wonders how closely the disciples' understanding of the resurrection of Jesus was bound up with their own sense of mission and destiny.

Thus the first witnesses may have come to an apprehension of the Easter experience through a number of different avenues. Prior to his crucifixion, Jesus had given them *intensive teaching*, and they had grasped at least some of the import of it. It is unlikely that many hours passed by before the disciples found themselves eating together and "*breaking bread*" in a manner associated with the presence of Jesus. And the records we have give considerable stress to the fact that the resurrection experiences were associated with a new understanding engendered in the studying of the *Hebrew Scriptures*. Their sense of being *commissioned* for a specific task is integral to the resurrection narratives. For the early Christian community, those experiences marked by *sense perception* formed the climax or high point of a number of experiences which collectively convinced them that Jesus was alive. Matthew's comment that "some doubted" (28:17) might well imply that *the reality of the resurrection appearance of Jesus was only grasped in the light of the other factors mentioned above*. Those who experienced sense perception *and nothing more*, were not convinced that Jesus was alive.

We turn now to a consideration of texts dealing with the appearance of the risen Christ to Paul. Do we find reflected here the same ambiguity concerning the nature of Paul's experience that we have noted in the gospel accounts? And how significant a factor is sense perception in Paul's understanding of this encounter?

In I Cor. 15:3-8 Paul lists himself alongside the first witnesses of the resurrection, Peter, the Twelve, "more than 500 brothers," James, and "all the Apostles." Clearly Paul understood these other appearances to be in the same category as the appearance granted to him.¹¹ To describe these experiences, Paul uses the verb form *opthe*, which is commonly used to indicate " 'the presence of revelation as such without reference to the nature of its perception,' or, 'the presence of the God who reveals

¹⁰Cf. H. B. Green, "The Command to Baptize and Other Matthaean Interpolations" S.E. Vol. IV 1968. In the Eusebian text verses 18-20 form a stanza of four couplets in recognizable rhythm, balanced in the manner of Hebrew poetry.

¹¹Evans, *Op. Cit.* p. 55, "In Paul there is no hint ... that there was any difference in kind between these appearances to others and that to himself; or conversely, that he understood the appearances to others in any other way than he understood his own." Evans also notes that the writer of Acts clearly did not intend his readers to interpret the appearance to Paul as being in the same category as those to the first witnesses. In his initial paragraphs he in effect closes the period of the resurrection appearances of Jesus (Acts 1:1-11).

himself in his word.' ”¹² It is used in the Septuagint to describe the appearance of Yahweh at the burning bush. On that occasion Moses veiled his face because “he was afraid to look at God” (Ex. 3:2-6); but he did hear the word spoken by God.

In Galatians Paul twice refers to his initial encounter with the risen Christ. He claims that his gospel came to him “through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (di’ apokalypseōs Iēsou Christou)¹³ (1:12); and he states that it pleased God “to reveal (apokalupsai) his son to (in) me” (1:16). Paul’s use of the words “revelation” and “reveal” imply that he himself was the *recipient* of the divine action.¹⁴ The active element of Paul’s experience is brought out only in I Corinthians 9:1 where Paul claims, “I have seen Jesus” (Iēsoūn heō̄raka).

The appearance of Jesus to Paul is described three times in Acts.¹⁵ It is characterized by a *light* which “suddenly ... flashed about him” (9:3), “a great light from heaven” (22:6), “brighter than the sun” (26:13). A *voice* speaks Paul’s name and challenges his activity, and then identifies the speaker, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” Luke adds, “The men who were travelling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no-one” (9:7). Later we read, “Those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me” (22:9). The third account also suggests that the light was apparent to Paul’s companions—it shone around them and they all fell to the ground, but the voice spoke only to Paul. Paul comments, “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision” (te ouraniō optasia).¹⁶

In the first account it is not indicated that Paul *saw* Jesus. Paul is blinded by the light, hears only the voice, and after the incident is over can still see nothing. Ananias states, “The Lord sent me, Jesus, who appeared to you (ho ophtheis) on the road by which you came” (9:17). The second account too introduces the idea that Paul *saw* Jesus only in

¹⁵Acts 9:1-22; 22:3-21; 26:9-23. Cf. W. Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 98-111; and C. F. Evans, *Resurrection and the New Testament*, pp. 41-313. Challenging Marxsen’s position is K. L. McKay, “Some Linguistic Points in Marxsen’s Resurrection Theory,” E.T. 84 (11 ’73), pp. 330-332. D. M. Stanley, “Paul’s Conversion in Acts—Why The Three Accounts?” C.E.Q. 15 (1953), p. 315-338.

¹⁶Acts 26:19 Cf. Acts 1:3, “During 40 days appearing to them” (optanomenos). In Paul’s own writings the word *optasia* is used only once—(II Cor. 12:1), and not with reference to the Damascus Road experience.

¹²TDNT Vol. V, p. 358. “It thus seems that when ὄφθη is used as a tt to denote the resurrection appearances there is no primary emphasis on seeing as sensual or mental perception. The dominant thought is that the appearances are revelations, encounters with the risen Lord who herein reveals himself, or is revealed.” Cf. Lk. 24:34, “The Lord is risen indeed and has appeared (ὄφθη) to Simon.” The precise nature of this appearance to Peter is nowhere indicated in the New Testament. (J. Jeremias proposes an Aramaic original for ὄφθη which would be translated either “he was seen” or “he appeared.” See Evans, *Op. Cit.*, p. 45.)

¹³Objective genitive—see v. 16.

¹⁴Cf. Bornkamm, “The Revelation of Christ to Paul,” *Reconciliation and Hope*, pp. 94-97. Bornkamm comments that “revelation” in this context refers both to “the change of aeons in Christ” and to the “divine authorization of the apostle to proclaim the gospel” (p. 97).

the comment made by Ananias—"The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Just One and to hear a voice from his mouth, for you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have *seen* and heard" (22:14-15).¹⁷

In the third account we have the enigmatic statement, "For this purpose I have appeared (ophthen) to you to appoint you as a servant and a witness of the things in which you have seen (me¹⁸) and of the things in which I will appear (ophthēsomai) to you" (26:16).¹⁹ The use of the plural here (hōn) lends itself to the suggestion that Paul had more than one vision of the risen Christ; and the use of the future (ophthēsomai) could be taken to indicate that this experience was to be repeated. Paul does in fact elsewhere refer to "visions" (optaisias) and "revelations of the Lord" (āpokalypseis kuriou) (II Cor. 12:1).²⁰ But Paul evidently considered the group of experiences referred to in I Cor. 15 to be unique and a matter of past history. His use of the phrase "last of all" to introduce his own name makes it clear that he does not equate his encounter with the risen Christ with the experience of faith common to every Christian from that time onward.

This investigation shows that in Paul's case also there is a certain ambiguity concerning the nature of the encounter with the risen Christ. Paul's use of ὀφθη, and of apokalupsai and cognates, tends to remove the occurrence from the realm of sense perception, and Luke's use of the noun optasia adds support to this. Paul becomes the passive recipient of a revelation. However Paul does imply the active element in I Cor. 9:1, "I have seen ... Jesus." The narratives in Acts all state that Paul was blinded by the light and fell to the ground, which would seem to preclude the visual element.²¹ It was on each occasion the *voice* which identified the presence of Jesus.²²

Is it possible that sense perception had only a *partial* significance for

¹⁷Cf. Acts 9:27. Also Acts 4:20. "Seen and heard" was evidently standard "witness" terminology.

¹⁸Omitted in XAE and other Mss.

¹⁹F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 445, translates, "of the visions which you both have had and will have of me." *Jerusalem Bible* reads, "of this vision (sic) in which you have seen me, and of others in which I shall appear to you." *RSV* reads, "to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you."

²⁰This parallels the use of the objective genitive in Gal. 1:12 where the context indicates that the Damascus Road experience is alluded to.

²¹It is not known whether Paul met Jesus prior to the crucifixion and whether he could have identified the speaker by his "physical" characteristics.

²²In the same way Elijah "wrapped his face in his mantle" at the time of his encounter with Yahweh. The *voice*, not the appearance of Yahweh, identified his presence (I Kings 19:13). There are other parallels between the Elijah narrative and Paul's conversion experience: a) The challenging question implying rebuke; b) the command to travel northwards towards Damascus; c) The commissioning of both for special tasks which were to begin in Damascus and which involved an extension of influence to Gentiles, and so on. If Luke consciously has the Elijah motif in mind underlying these narratives, the possibility exists that the "appearance" of Jesus to Paul parallels the "appearance" of Yahweh to Elijah—that is to say there is no necessary implication that it was a visual experience.

Paul in his encounter with the risen Christ? And does he in fact link his name confidently with the early witnesses in I Cor. 15 because he understood sense perception to have had only a *partial* significance for them?²³

For Paul the Damascus Road encounter with Jesus was of significance because it marked his initial entry into the Christian community.²⁴ The elements of sense perception were closely linked with a sense of *commission* to a specific task, something resembling the prophetic call. Paul's knowledge of the *Hebrew scriptures*²⁵ gave to his experience strength and validity. His association with the Christian community introduced him to the community meal and the *eucharist*. Conversations with members of the Christian community acquainted him with the teaching of Jesus. The time lapse²⁶ between these events became immaterial, as *collectively* they constituted a "revelation of Jesus Christ."

CONCLUSION

There were several avenues through which the early Christian community grasped the reality that Jesus was alive. *Sense perception* alone, though significant, was not conclusive. A variety of other experiences gave meaning to each encounter with the risen Christ. For the early witnesses, as for Paul, the element of sense perception associated with the resurrection appearances of Jesus, was closely linked with the receiving of a *commission* for a specific task—a sense of destiny. Along with this, an enlightened understanding of the *Hebrew scriptures*; acquaintance with the *teaching of Jesus* concerning the implications of his death; and participation in the *eucharist*, collectively established for the early church that Jesus was alive.

²³Cf. Kümmel, *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 102. "Paul does not assume that Jesus appeared in his earthly body to the resurrection witnesses."

²⁴The only other person we have reason to believe entered the Christian community as a result of such an encounter with the risen Christ is James, the brother of Jesus. Of course, we have no precise knowledge concerning whether the "five hundred brothers" were disciples of Jesus before the resurrection appearance.

²⁵Acts 9:20-22. A new understanding of the scriptures was associated with the presence of the Holy Spirit, Cf. Acts 9:17.

²⁶The commission to Paul is variously placed as being given in Damascus by Ananias (Acts 9:15ff; 22:14f); repeated in the Temple in Jerusalem (Acts 22:17 ff); and as taking place on the Damascus Road (Acts 26:16ff).