



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

**A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)**  
**Lesson 6.6.2.2.1 – The Doctrine of Jesus, Son of God, Messiah (Christology)**

**The Many Appearances of the Risen Christ**

Jesus did not want His disciples or us to have any doubts about His bodily resurrection from the dead. For this reason, He appeared alive in their presence during a forty-day period after His resurrection. Luke says that Jesus **“presented Himself alive (to them) after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God”** (Acts 1:3).

There are at least eleven occasions that are referred to in the four Gospels and in the book of Acts when Jesus appeared alive to various witnesses. We list them here in the probable order in which they occurred:

1. We read in Mark 16:9: **“Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons.”** This appearance is described more fully in the Gospel of John. Mary Magdalene was one of several women who got up early on Sunday morning and walked to Jesus’ tomb for the purpose of anointing His dead body. They did not expect to see Him alive, even though He had told them many times that on the third day He would rise again. When these women got closer to the tomb, they realized that the stone at the entrance had been rolled away. Mary Magdalene immediately suspected foul play and left the other women to fetch Peter and John. John and Peter then both ran to the tomb. John got there first, but he did not go in. Peter then went in, and John followed. Both John and Peter **“saw the linen cloths lying there”** (John 20:5-6). Peter also saw **“the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself”** (John 20:7). There was no evidence of foul play.

Peter and John then returned to Jerusalem. But Mary Magdalene returned to the tomb. **“She saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain”** (John 20:12). When the angels asked her why she was weeping, she replied: **“Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him”** (John 20:13). She still wanted to see His dead body so that she could anoint it. Then a man suddenly appeared whom she thought was the gardener. When He (the gardener who was actually Jesus) asked her why she was crying, she said to Him: **“Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away”** (John 20:15). Then Jesus said to her: **“Mary!” and she realized who He was. He told her to tell the others what had happened, and she “told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her”** (John 20:18).

2. The other women with whom Mary Magdalene had been walking had arrived at the tomb before John and Peter and Mary Magdalene. The angels whom they saw at the tomb told them that Jesus had risen from the dead. **“So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word. And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, ‘Rejoice!’ So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him”** (Matthew 28:8-9). But even after hearing reports from Mary Magdalene and the other women, the disciples at first **“did not believe”** (Mark 16:11,13). Luke gives a similar report: **“Their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them”** (Luke 24:11).

Jesus later **“rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen”** (Mark 16:14).

3. Among those who did not believe these first reports that Jesus had risen from the dead were two sad disciples who were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus on that Sunday afternoon. The name of one of the two was Cleopas. When a Stranger (who was actually Jesus, but they did not recognize Him) joined them, He asked them why they were so sad. They told Him about Jesus’ suffering and death by crucifixion, and then they lamented: **“We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened. Yes, and certain women of our company, who arrived at the tomb early, astonished us. When they did not find His body, they came seeing that they had also seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. And certain of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but Him they did not see”** (Luke 24:21-24). These two had all this information about what had happened, and still they were sad.

The Stranger then proceeded to give them an Old Testament lesson on the promises of the Messiah that included both suffering and death before there could be glory. He said to them: **“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?”** And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all of the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:25-27).

When they then stopped at Emmaus and ate together, **“their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight”** (Luke 24:31). Immediately they returned to Jerusalem and informed the others of what they had seen and heard.

4. Around this same time the risen Jesus appeared alive to Simon Peter. We do not have any information as to where this happened or what kind of conversation Jesus and Peter had with each other. We only know that when the two travelers to Emmaus returned to the others in Jerusalem, the others were saying among themselves: **“The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!”** (Luke 24:34). This appearance to Peter is the first one in Paul’s list of appearances of the risen Savior in his first letter to the Corinthians: **“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and ... He was buried, and ... He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and ... He was seen by Cephas”** (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).
5. The second appearance of the risen Jesus that Paul mentions is His appearance to **“the twelve”** (1 Corinthians 15:5). This no doubt refers to the appearance Jesus made to His disciples on Sunday evening. Only ten of the twelve were actually present. Judas Iscariot, of course, was not there, and Thomas also was missing. The most complete accounts of this appearance are recorded in Luke 24:36-42 and John 20:19-23. Jesus greeting to them was **“Peace be with you”** (Luke 24:36; John 20:19, 21). At first they were terrified, but eventually they **“were glad when they saw the Lord”** (John 20:20). Jesus showed them His hands, His feet and His side, and He ate in their presence. It was at this time that Jesus **“breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are redeemed’”** (John 20:22-23).
6. Thomas was not with the others when Jesus appeared on Easter Sunday evening. When the others said that they had seen the Lord, he refused to believe them. He said: **“Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe”** (John 20:25). Jesus knew what Thomas had said. One week later, on the Sunday after Easter, Jesus appeared to the group again. This time Thomas was with them. **“Then He said to Thomas, ‘Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing’”** (John 20:27). Even Thomas was now convinced, and he said to Jesus: **“My Lord and my God!”** (John 20:28).

7. The seventh appearance of the risen Jesus to His followers was to seven of His disciples as they were fishing at the Sea of Galilee. Among the seven were Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, and John. They had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. Then a Man on shore (who turned out to be Jesus) told them to cast their net on the right side of the boat. They followed His suggestion and caught 153 large fish. John told Peter that the Man on shore must be Jesus. Jesus made breakfast for them, and they ate. After the meal Jesus had an extended conversation with Peter, who had denied Him three times after His arrest. Now three times Peter confessed his love for Jesus, and Jesus told him to feed and tend His sheep and lambs. This account is told to us in detail in John 21:1-25, and it says that **“this is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead”** (John 21:14). It is called the third time because John is referring to the times Jesus appeared to His disciples as a group, rather than to one or two individuals (the previous two times are #5 and #6).
8. On the Thursday of Holy Week, when Jesus’ betrayal and arrest, He had said to His disciples: **“After I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee”** (Matthew 26:32). This is why the angels at Jesus’ tomb told the women: **“Tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him”** (Matthew 28:7). This eighth appearance of Jesus had been planned for a long time. Jesus told them when and where He would appear to them. So: **“The eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted”** (Matthew 28:16-17). It was at this time that Jesus gave them what is called the Great Commission: to make disciples of all nations by baptizing them and teaching them to observe His instructions. Jesus here also promised to be with them always as they carried out His instructions.

It is very likely that this is the appearance the apostle Paul was referring to when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **“After than He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep”** (1 Corinthians 15:6). Since Jesus had announced this appearance in advance and had appointed a certain place for this appearance, it seems likely that as many disciples as possible would gather together at this time to see their Lord and to hear what He had to say to them.

When Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, it was about twenty-five years later. Many of the 500 who had been there were still living, and the Christians in Corinth had the opportunity to get to know some of these witnesses and hear from their own lips what had happened. If they could not find any such witnesses, they would know that Paul was not telling them the truth, but Paul was sure of his details, and he knew that his account of Jesus’ resurrection appearances would stand up as completely truth. How many witnesses does it take to establish the truth of what took place? In this case there were over 500 witnesses! Again we see that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is one of the best authenticated events of all times. Our Lord does not want us to have any doubts that He really did rise from the dead.

9. The ninth appearance is mentioned only by Paul, and in few words: **“After that He was seen by James”** (1 Corinthians 15:7). There were several men named James among Jesus’ followers. The one referred to here was most likely Jesus’ brother James. He was a prominent leader of the congregation at Jerusalem at the time Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, so they would know who he was. James, the brother of John, was no longer living at this time. The other apostle James (known as James, the Less) was not a well-known leader at this time, so the Corinthians probably would not have known him.

James, the brother of Jesus, was not one of the twelve apostles; in fact, the Bible says that Jesus’ brothers did not believe in Him during the years of His ministry. But James and the other brothers (Jude, Simon, Joses) did believe in Him after He rose from the dead and became leaders in the congregation at Jerusalem.

10. Paul tells us that after the risen Jesus was seen by James, He was seen **“by all the apostles”** (1 Corinthians 15:7). This appearance took place at the Mount of Olives when Jesus ascended to heaven. We shall save our discussion of this occasion for the next lesson.
11. In writing to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul mentioned one last appearance of the risen Savior. As an apostle, he needed to include himself among the number of those who had seen the risen Christ: **“Last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time”** (1 Corinthians 15:8). Paul saw the risen Savior when he was on the road to Damascus, intending to find the Christians in that city and take them back to Jerusalem for trial and punishment – possibly even death. But as he neared Damascus, Jesus appeared to Him and called Him to be His special messenger and apostle to the Gentiles. The account of what happened to Paul (or Saul, as he was called at that time) is recorded in three places in the book of Acts: Acts 9:3-8, Acts 22:6-11, and Acts 26:12-18.

All of the events listed in the *Apostles’ Creed* are essential for our understanding and confessing of Jesus Christ, our Savior. But there can be no doubt that Jesus’ resurrection from the dead holds a very central place in Christian teaching. The main topic of the apostolic sermons in the book of Acts is Jesus’ death on the cross and His resurrection. When Jesus’ Jewish opponents asked Him for a sign that He was the Messiah, Jesus gave them the sign of Jonah, which is the sign of His resurrection: **“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”** (Matthew 12:40; also Matthew 16:4). Jesus’ death and resurrection were the subject of many Old Testament prophecies. During the forty-day period after His resurrection, Jesus taught His disciples and **“opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day’”** (Luke 24:45-46).

When the apostle Paul presented Christian doctrine in his letter to the Romans, Jesus’ resurrection was one of the points he stressed. In his introduction he pointed out that **“Jesus Christ our Lord”** was **“declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead”** (Romans 1:3-4). After explaining that Abraham was saved by faith in the promise of the Messiah, Paul showed that our salvation is based on Jesus’ death and resurrection and our faith or trust in those events. He says righteousness **“shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification”** (Romans 4:24-25). Jesus was put to death because our sins were given to Him for punishment. Jesus was raised from the dead because God now declares the whole world righteous because the sin of the world has been taken away. Thus, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God’s declaration to the whole world that the sins of the world borne by Jesus have been fully punished and now there is forgiveness for everyone in Him.

There are several other references to Jesus’ resurrection from the dead in Paul’s letter to the Romans. For example, he wrote: **“It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us”** (Romans 8:33-34). And Paul wrote: **“If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved”** (Romans 10:9). As we read the other New Testament letters, we find many other references to Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. This is a vital Christian doctrine, and we cannot be saved without it.

The many so-called Christians who deny the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead should not be considered Christians at all. Without the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, there is no hope for salvation for any of us. Only a living Savior can save us, not one who has died and remains in his tomb. The dead Buddha, the dead Confucius, the dead Mohammed, and whatever other dead prophet there may be, cannot save us. Only the living Lord Jesus, who died for the sin of all, rose from the dead and is fully alive at the present time, can and has saved us.

## Questions

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1. Why did Jesus show Himself alive to His disciples so many times?
2. Who was the first to see Jesus alive after His resurrection?
3. What did Peter and John discover when they went to Jesus' tomb?
4. What did the other women who went to the tomb see there?
5. How did Jesus' disciples react to the accounts of the women?
6. Why were Cleopas and his friend so sad as they walked to Emmaus?
7. What did the Stranger (Jesus) point out to them from the Bible?
8. Why were Jesus' disciples behind locked doors on Sunday evening?
9. What kind of authority did Jesus give to His disciples that night?
10. How did Jesus prove to them that He was the Jesus who had been dead?
11. What convinced Thomas that Jesus had risen from the dead?
12. What was the largest number of people saw Jesus at one time?
13. What instructions did Jesus give to His disciples on the mountain in Galilee?
14. On what mountain did Jesus ascend into heaven?
15. Why did Paul say he was born out of due time?
16. What is meant by the sign of Jonah?
17. What did the resurrection of Jesus prove about Jesus?
18. What does the resurrection of Jesus mean for our salvation?
19. What does this sentence mean: "The resurrection of Jesus is God's announcement to the whole world that its sins are forgiven"?
20. What is one of the great differences between Christianity and other religions?