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## The Community of the Risen Lord

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY EXISTS because of certain convictions that both define and motivate it. Chief among these is the firm belief that Jesus of Nazareth, acclaimed by his first followers as the Messiah and Savior of Israel, died on a Roman cross, rose again, and is now present in the midst of those communities that meet in his name. So crucial is this belief to Christians that were it not true, or if it could be demonstrated to be false, the whole project of the Christian church would be shown to be illusory. On the other hand, if it is indeed true then it is the most important truth that human beings could possibly know, revolutionizing as it does all accepted ways of thinking. The Christian faith stands or falls with the resurrection.

The church as we know it today has grown out of that initial community of disciples that Jesus gathered during his lifetime to be formed by his presence and teaching and to share in his mission to the world. Jesus himself, and his community with him, was in large measure, some would say almost exclusively, the product of the long story of the Jewish people in whom the God of Israel had sought to find a “royal priesthood, a holy nation” that would live in the world, to the benefit of the whole, as a “paradigm nation,” an ordered people living with supreme reference to God and exemplifying as a consequence what it meant in a particular land and era to live for the glory of God (Exod 19:1–6). Continuing and extending this story, the gospel of Jesus and the community of disciples became the possession not of Israel alone but of the whole earth, and continue to spread astonishingly to cultures and places far removed from their Palestinian starting place. Their common theme and message remains the same: Jesus the Messiah is alive

and continues to take form for us within the church. The church is the body of Christ, not in the sense that it is without fault, as Jesus was, but in that it is the place above all places where Jesus can be found. Embodied existence has many delights and joys, but it means most obviously that we know where to find someone. Locate their body (with which they are inextricably involved) and there you will find him or her. Similarly, the body of Christ makes Jesus locatable within the complexities of modern life. The risen Christ is in the midst of his church. There he continues to take form. There he continues to be Emmanuel, “God with us” (Matt 1:23).

### CHRIST PRESENT IN THE CHURCH

How are we to understand this presence of Christ in the church? It is certainly the case that churches exist to sustain the memory of Jesus. They ensure that his memory will not perish from the earth, and this is to the benefit not only of Christian believers but of all others as well. That company of non-Christians, whether non-believers or other-believers, which nonetheless reveres Jesus as teacher, or supreme exemplar of the good, humane life and is grateful for him, only has access to him because there is an enduring community that has kept the memory of Jesus alive and offered that memory to the world. His memory lives in the writings that Christians have produced and now revere as Scripture, and that they preserve through translation, publication, and constant reiteration in their services of worship and liturgies. His memory lives through the church's rites and practices focused in baptism and the breaking of bread by means of which the church recalls and perpetuates events and realities embedded in the life of Jesus himself and prescribed by him. His memory lives in the testimony and witness of people for whom the light of Christ illuminates their present living, who are inspired both to live and to live well on the basis of what he taught. The power of living memory should not be underestimated.

Yet important and indispensable though memory is, when we refer to the resurrection we are talking about more than memory. To say that Christ is “risen” constitutes an infinitely more radical claim. It might be true enough to say that the resurrection of Jesus is a way of insisting that the “spirit” or the “values” of Jesus did not perish with him but live on in the community that reveres him. It might also be true after a fashion to say that for as long as the memory of Jesus persists he cannot be said to be dead. But though true, neither of these constructs would be enough to address the reality of the resurrection. The resurrection claim is that by the power of God something happened to Jesus before it ever happened in the minds

of those who became his witnesses. By the power of God the whole of Jesus' identity, body and soul, was brought through death into the life of the new age, the life of God itself, and he appeared for a period of time in glorified form to his closest followers, and some others, to impress upon them indelibly that he had defeated death and would never succumb to it again (Acts 1:3). When, for good reasons, these bodily appearances ceased, the risen Christ continued to be with his disciples in the Spirit, who is the form of his enduring presence today. By the Spirit of God (of whom more later), the risen Christ is in the midst of those communities of faith that look to him and keep his memory alive and believe that in so doing they share in the life of one who lives not just metaphorically or by force of human imagination, but truly and actually.

Christian communities live by this conviction and without it would lose their very reason for being. Yet it is not their only conviction. It acts like the hub of a wheel from which multiple spokes extend. Because Christ is risen many things follow. Christ inspires a whole way of thinking that has come to reshape for Christians their interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures and religion, resulting in a distinctive faith-position that has proven to be imaginative, persuasive, adaptable, and transformative for two thousand years, and that continues to grow and make its impact today. These convictions are rooted in the history of Jesus of Nazareth as his story is told in the documents that now comprise the New Testament. Attention needs to be paid therefore at the beginning of this exploration to the Jesus of history, the Jewish carpenter and unaccredited rabbi from Nazareth, and to the accounts of the resurrection that are so fundamental to the Christian testimony.

## THE JESUS OF HISTORY

There are a few people, a very few, who claim that Jesus never lived and that he is a character of imaginative fiction. There are others who believe that he did indeed live but that we know hardly anything about him, the Gospels being largely fabrications of his early followers. More sober historians are thoroughly skeptical about such skepticism and acknowledge that in actual fact we know a remarkable amount. Jesus is firmly located in datable and reliable history. Doubt about his existence is arguably not motivated by a desire to uncover objective history so much as by bias against him and the faith that stems from him.

The following sets out a number of secure facts about the Jesus of history that it is possible to affirm, whether a person is a Christian or not:

- Jesus was born around the year 4 BC, near the time of the death of Herod the Great;
- He spent his childhood and early adult years in Nazareth, a Galilean village;
- He was baptized by John the Baptist;
- He called disciples;
- He taught in the towns, villages, and countryside of Galilee (apparently not the cities);
- He preached “the kingdom of God,”
- About the year 30 he went to Jerusalem for Passover;
- He created a disturbance in the Temple area;
- He had a final meal with his disciples;
- He was arrested and interrogated by the Jewish authorities, specifically the high priest;
- He was executed on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.

To which we may add the equally secure facts about the aftermath of his life:

- His disciples at first fled;
- They saw him (in what sense will be explored further below) after his death;
- As a consequence, they believed that he would return to found the kingdom;
- They formed a community to await his return and sought to win others to faith in him as God’s Messiah. This community is what we now call the church.<sup>1</sup>

These facts are as secure and certain as any other historical facts, and perhaps more so given that compelling evidence for many events we take for granted is not always to be found. Together they mean that the basic outline of the life of Jesus that is presented to us in the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is reliable and dependable—contrary to what some people sometimes claim (often not historians, and usually with an ideological axe to grind). It is important for Christians that the basic shape of Jesus’ life and career should be confirmed in this way since the Christian faith, unlike some other world religions, depends upon certain things, like Christ’s death and resurrection, actually having happened. Christian conviction is rooted

1. Based upon Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 10–11.

in history. Historical evidence is therefore important in attesting some basic facts.

## JESUS IN HIS CONTEXT

As time and scholarship have developed, we have come to understand a great deal more about the world in which Jesus lived and which formed the background to his life. The Jewish historian Geza Vermes has demonstrated in a series of books (the clearest of which is *Jesus the Jew*) that the picture we have of Jesus in the Gospels fits remarkably well with what we now know of his context from other places. Vermes demonstrates from contemporary sources how Galilee, the home province of Jesus in the north of Israel and bordering the Gentile nations, was a location for non-rabbinical and anti-establishment Judaism. We have knowledge of other charismatic, itinerant rabbis from the first century who were also exorcists and healers not dissimilar to Jesus, such as Hanina ben-Dosa and Honi the Circle-Drawer. Like Jesus, such men attracted disciples, taught wisdom, and performed wonders; they evoked devotion and lived on in the memory of their followers once they were dead, with shrines being erected to them. Honorific titles such as “lord” and “son of God” were applied to them by their devotees. Whereas some might at first feel that the existence of such parallel figures to Jesus reduces his uniqueness, what it in fact does is to confirm and authenticate the picture of Jesus that is presented in the Gospels. The New Testament itself hints that there were others who did some of the things that Jesus did, not only John the Baptist, but others who cast out demons (Luke 9:49–50) or had messianic pretensions (Acts 5:33–39). Judaism at the time of Jesus was very much in flux and was capable of throwing up all kinds of variations, yet the most significant thing to note is that the figures we have mentioned have all but been forgotten, except by historians who research largely inaccessible texts, whereas Jesus of Nazareth has become the central figure in a global religion—the world’s largest religious tradition. This remarkable fact, that a carpenter and wandering rabbi from a minority ethnic group in a small province of the Empire has achieved global status, cries out for some kind of explanation. How has this happened? What is it that Jesus had that the others did not?

First of all, in answering this question, we are able to point to the *quantity* of what Jesus taught. By contrast, we have only a few isolated sayings from figures such as Honi and Hanina. The New Testament gives to us a surprising amount of information concerning Jesus’ life and teaching, such as his unsurpassed parables, the Sermon on the Mount, his prophetic

and compassionate acts of healing and deliverance, his friends and followers, his controversies with establishment figures, the events of his public ministry, and above all of his final week and of his trial, death, and resurrection. Together these accounts supply a rich and powerful narrative that has gripped the imagination of people across the world, from all kinds of cultures, countries, and conditions. Whatever else might be said, the story of Jesus is one of the greatest stories ever told. For that reason it has proved to be exceptionally attractive and persuasive from the beginning until now.

Secondly, this leads us to affirm the *quality* of what Jesus taught. Jesus was a creative interpreter of the Jewish heritage. Although a faithful son of Israel, he was able to take his heritage and its Scriptures and both affirm and develop the direction in which they were tending. Recent Jewish scholarship is at pains to stress how well Jesus reflects the best and most advanced in Jewish thought of his day, which, as we have already indicated, was passing through a time of creative ferment. It is clear that Jesus brought both a distinctive message and a special kind of genius to his preaching and communication. The parables he told, such as the stories of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, are outstanding forms of communication and have become part of the common heritage of the human race as a whole, not simply of Christians. However, the assumption that Jesus taught in parables in order to illustrate his message and make it clear is only partly correct. He saw himself fulfilling the words in Isaiah addressed to the people of Israel, "You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive" (Matt 13:14, Isa 6:9–10). Many of the parables of Jesus are enigmatic, such that to understand them the hearers needed to have a good disposition, a willingness in advance to understand and be taught: "For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance" (Matt 13:12). This is highly sophisticated. Moreover, it is reported that Jesus "taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt 7:29). This suggests that the authority of Jesus came not from referring to other rabbis and teachers but from within, from one who was deeply engaged with what he taught and the God from whom it came. The profound and unique relationship Jesus felt he had with the Father, "Abba," was the wellspring from which his teaching came (Luke 10:21–22).

Thirdly, we might draw attention to the *content* of what Jesus taught. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom, the reign of God, the coming of God, and understood himself to be the very agent of God's coming. God's kingdom is that realm where God's will is done, God's justice is upheld, and God's peace is known. Its coming was foretold by the prophets and eagerly awaited in the future, but according to Jesus it was even now present. God's kingdom was both "now" and "not yet." The Spirit of God was active in the works of

healing and deliverance that Jesus ministered: “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Luke 11:20). Because the coming of God to help and deliver God’s people was near, Jesus called upon his fellow Israelites to repent and make themselves ready. The message of Jesus was therefore about an imminent transformation, about something that was happening in history according to the purpose of God which would fulfill the expectations of the Old Testament prophets and introduce something radically new. Particularly to be noticed here is the way Jesus identified himself with Israel’s God and saw the coming of God in his own person and deeds: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father; or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Luke 10:22). If the kingdom of God is the coming of God’s own self to reign and if that coming of God is taking place in and through Jesus, Jesus is to be closely identified with God, and so the foundation is laid for the followers of Jesus later to speak of him as the Son of God.

Finally, and supremely, Jesus has been remembered whereas other charismatic teachers of his day have been forgotten because of the *confirmation* of what Jesus taught. God’s confirmation of Jesus was his resurrection from the dead. This is seen as God’s vindication of Jesus in face of the fact that the authorities and powers of his day rejected him and what he stood for, and put him to death. The resurrection was God’s rejection of the human rejection of Jesus. Being raised from the dead makes a difference to whether or not you are remembered. This is to understate the case. Being risen, Jesus’ life and mission could now be interpreted backwards in the light of the resurrection. Who he was, what he did, what he said, everything about him, could now be looked upon with new eyes and new depth. We noted the historical fact that titles such as “Lord” and “son of God” were used of some charismatic figures of Jesus’ era, supporting the Gospel account of such and similar titles being applied to Jesus in his lifetime. Now, in the light shed retrospectively by the resurrection such terms acquire new depths of meaning and become the basis of the “Christology” of the New Testament, the activity of explaining the true and full identity of Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God. He truly is the Lord. Without the resurrection Jesus would have fallen into obscurity, as did so many others, and been more or less forgotten. He was remembered because he was raised and being raised his importance could not be denied. The memory of Jesus became too powerful to be discarded.

## THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS AS THE CHRIST

That Jesus has been remembered, more than this, that he has been embraced and honored by so many people for so very long without a sign, globally speaking, that devotion to him is diminishing, is itself testimony to the truth of the resurrection since without it, it is problematic to explain why Jesus should have been so remembered. Yet the fact is that according to our regular human experience people are not raised from the dead. This salient fact is, of course, the whole point: that Jesus was raised when no others are is what distinguishes him. It is essential therefore for Christians to stand on firm ground when they make the enormous and extraordinary claim that Jesus is risen from the dead. Although the great majority of Christians wish to assert this fact because of their experience of encounter with Christ in conversion, worship, and prayer, experiences that can be intensely real and personal, such claims remain nonetheless subjective and in principle beyond objective testing. It is necessary therefore to support them by more objective arguments and evidence. After all, the Christian claim is that something has actually happened in history that affects us all. If it could be shown that nothing actually happened or that a more credible alternative explanation is available, in other words, if the resurrection claim could be falsified, then Christians would need to retract their claim and think again about the meaning of their religion. We need therefore to demonstrate that the claim to a resurrection is soundly based. It is not that the historical event of the resurrection can be historically proved (though some people claim this). Rather it is about demonstrating that the burden of evidence points in the direction of Jesus truly being raised and that this claim is the most persuasive explanation of the relevant evidence. On this basis Christians are justified in placing their faith in Christ not as an act of blind faith but of reasonable and warranted trust.

First of all we need to reflect upon what the resurrection does or does not imply. It certainly implies that something happened to the dead Jesus. Something happened to Jesus once dead before anything ever happened to his disciples. The resurrection is not about the rebirth of hope within the hearts of the disconsolate disciples, nor is it about a decision on their part to keep the movement going and the memory of Jesus alive. All these things were consequences of what first of all happened to Jesus. The disciples were broken and disillusioned until it became clear that Jesus was indeed alive.

Secondly, we should be clear that the resurrection does not mean that the dead body of Jesus was restored to the condition it had before he died—this would be a resuscitation rather than a resurrection. Resuscitations are well within the bounds of common experience. It is recorded that in this



sense Jesus himself raised people from the dead (for instance, Lazarus in John 11). Those so raised would one day die again and for good. But resurrection is an event of a different order. It means that the body of Jesus was raised into a new dimension of existence having been transformed from its mortal condition into immortality. Jesus' body was "glorified" (Luke 24:26, Phil 3:21 margin), that is, taken up into the quality of life that is God's own and raised beyond the possibility of dying again. In this sense the resurrection should be seen as a happening in history whereby the future life, the life of the world to come, was already found within the present. Jewish belief was that in the fullness of time all would be raised from the dead to face judgment, the "general resurrection," but Christians claimed that here and now it had happened to Jesus. It was in this glorified form that Jesus then appeared to his disciples, which probably explains some aspects of his appearances, such as passing through locked doors. In the resurrection Jesus was identifiably himself, bearing in his body the scars of his crucifixion and speaking with the same voice (John 20:16, 26–29). Yet he was also mysteriously transformed, still present in the body, but a different kind of body, a "glorious" body. It should be clear then that the resurrection was an event of a different order. Although it happened in history and made its impact it cannot properly be defined as a "historical event" as such since it did not arise by cause and effect out of what had gone before. Rather it was a unique act of God in history, introducing something completely new, which for that very reason holds open the possibility of new life for all.

Although the resurrection itself cannot finally be proved and requires an openness to God and divine possibility before it is likely to be embraced, there is something that can indeed be taken as cast-iron history with a confidence that matches or exceeds any other historical event. This is that *the disciples of Jesus firmly believed that he had been raised from the dead*. Even if they were mistaken, the fact that they believed as they did is supported by all the evidence that we have and is itself the explanation for their subsequent actions in spreading the message, always at the cost of suffering and frequently of their own lives. But if they did believe this the question clearly follows: why did they do so and act upon their belief with such boldness? The most persuasive answer is that they were eye-witnesses, that Jesus actually was raised from the dead and appeared to them so that there was for them overwhelming proof that he was alive. This confidence is clearly seen, for instance, in a passage such as 1 John 1:1–2: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us."

Although the New Testament certainly shows a degree of development in the ways in which Jesus was understood, and we shall explore these in due course, it is entirely mistaken to believe that the high view the disciples held of Jesus was something that simply developed slowly over time. This is a common assumption that skeptics advance: the claim they make is that Jesus began as an ordinary Jewish teacher, but over a lengthy period of time he was gradually raised in the imagination of his followers to higher and higher status until he became for them God incarnate. All the evidence suggests, however, that this was not the case. To the contrary, it was from the very beginning, within a very short time, even days, of his death, that they ascribed such high status to Jesus in calling him “Lord.” “God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). All of this points to an abrupt and startling event by which Jesus moved from the humiliation of death on a Roman cross to exaltation at God’s right hand. The transition from Jewish carpenter to divine Lord and Son of God was not gradual but immediate and a consequence of the astonishing exaltation of Jesus in the resurrection.

## EVIDENCE FOR THE RESURRECTION

It is time then to review the evidence for the resurrection. Some basic facts are worth stating.

- Jesus died a shameful death. Death on a cross was a very cruel form of execution and was regarded by Jewish people as particularly accursed. Crucifixions were common under Roman occupation and Jesus was one of very many whose lives were taken in this way. That Jesus met his end on a cross is beyond doubt and few question it. It is not the kind of event that anyone would invent to promote their favored teacher or create a new religion. Jesus was crucified on the Friday of the Passover feast in or around the year 30 AD.
- He was given an honorable burial. The bodies of the crucified were often left to rot or alternatively were disposed of by being deposited in a pit. Some believed this happened to Jesus, though there is nothing to suggest this in the Gospel sources. However, everything we know about those who attract deep devotion in their lives suggests that their followers seek to care for their bodies after death. Exactly this happened after the execution of Jesus’ predecessor, John the Baptist (Mark 6:29). It is more likely therefore that the body of Jesus was treated with respect by his followers. The Gospel record is that Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent person and a secret follower of Jesus, asked

for the body of Jesus and along with the female followers and relatives of Jesus ensured that he was properly buried with appropriate dignity.

- The tomb was then found empty. For this to be discovered the location of Jesus' tomb had to be known, as indicated in the previous point. On the third day (counting Friday and Sunday as whole days and after the Sabbath was over), when those closest to Jesus came to complete the burial preparations (which had been rushed because of the onset of the Jewish Sabbath at dusk on the Friday), the tomb was found to be empty. Of itself this did not imply that he had been raised and the first, and natural, assumption was that someone had removed his body (John 20:15).
- Jesus was seen alive by his closest disciples, who became convinced that he had "risen." It was the repeated appearances of Jesus after his death that persuaded the disciples that he had indeed been raised. This was the explanation for the tomb being empty, which itself implied that the resurrection involved the raising of the body of Jesus and not his "spirit" only.
- Those disciples were transformed by their encounter. Having scattered after the death of Jesus for fear of their own lives they were now gathered together once more. Some of them, such as Peter, Mary Magdalene, and James the brother of Jesus, experienced individual encounters with Jesus, others encountered him within a group. The clearest and earliest witness to this comes not from the Gospels (which were written later), but from the apostle Paul who wrote, "he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me" (1 Cor 15:5–8). These words were written less than twenty years after the resurrection. But the literary form of this section and the use of Peter's Aramaic name "Cephas" indicate that Paul was citing a tradition that was handed on to him when he was converted, just a few years after the resurrection itself. This takes us very close to the event.
- The disciples of Jesus were to pay a huge price for their conviction including in many cases martyrdom. People are prepared to die for what they believe in, but not for what they know to be untrue or themselves have fabricated. As has been said, therefore, the fact that they truly believed Jesus had risen must be taken as a solid historical fact. The most

convincing explanation of this fact is that he had indeed been raised and they were witnesses of his appearances (Acts 10:34–43).

- The resurrection supplied the energy that carried the Christian faith into the Roman Empire and the world. It is worth pondering how a faith centered in a Jewish carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee whose life came to an end in shameful crucifixion could have undergone such an astonishing trajectory. This unlikely occurrence is hard to countenance without concluding that some remarkable event assisted it on its way. The resurrection, and the energy and conviction it supplied, is that event. Other explanations are either lacking or inadequate to explain it.

### ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE RESURRECTION

Arguments against the resurrection are often more difficult to believe than the resurrection itself because they are based on speculation rather than evidence. They often border on historical fiction. It is certainly the case that alternative hypotheses aplenty have been suggested, conspiracy on the part of the disciples being one and probably the first approach. It was put about by the Jewish authorities that the disciples stole Jesus' body by night (Matt 28:11–15). This sees the resurrection as a fraud perpetrated by the disciples. Indirectly, and ironically, this is actually evidence that the tomb was indeed empty, and so in fact ends up substantiating the fact of the empty tomb. However, it fails to explain why the disciples should go on to preach the resurrection so heroically and to pay for it with persecution and their lives. Other hypotheses see the resurrection accounts as being based on some kind of mistake. These include the possibility that the wrong tomb was visited by the women on the morning of the resurrection; that Jesus did not actually die on the cross but had his place taken by another, Simon of Cyrene being the most obvious candidate (Luke 23:26); that Jesus was on the cross but did not actually die and then revived once he was in the cool of the tomb, only to escape from it and convince people he had conquered death. Given that each of these scenarios could easily have been uncovered and disproved at the time, and the resurrection therefore falsified, they do not command much credibility, let alone explain how the world's most prominent and ennobling religion could be based either on a mistake or a conspiracy.

While these wilder theories are easy to dismiss, Christians need to be aware of some weightier objections to their claim. It may be objected that after two thousand years it is impossible to recapture what actually did happen after the death of Jesus and that agnosticism is the best policy. There

is currently a greater willingness to accept that religious experiences are a recurring fact of human psychology through the ages. Even today religious experiences, such as visions and apparently extra-sensory perceptions, can be recorded and documented, but not necessarily explained. The fact that we do not yet understand this dimension of the human subconscious, the argument runs, should not lead us to abandon the assumption that it might with time be explained “naturally” and without reference to God. It is known for instance that “bereavement visions” sometimes occur in which one who has recently died reappears, or is thought to do so, in a highly vivid way, sometimes in a way involving touch as well as speech, to the living. Reported visions of the Virgin Mary are a parallel example of this and can be both intense and repeated. Neither is there available to us any way of adjudicating whether those who bear witness to these experiences are actually seeing a real, though deceased person, or undergoing a psychologically induced phenomenon that is simply an illusion, though one that feels real. The distinction here is between visions that are “viewer-dependent” or “viewer-independent.” The unconvinced and skeptical might therefore acknowledge that the first disciples underwent some hard-to-define religious experience or bereavement vision that sincerely convinced them that Christ had risen. They then objectified this in a series of resurrection narratives, both to capture their experiences and to develop a kind of apologetic to answer objections to their claim, for instance in showing how it was not true that the disciples removed the body. In its turn this might explain for the skeptic why the resurrection accounts differ from each other in details, though not in their main claim, and why after the down-to-earth and historically convincing account of the crucifixion the accounts of the resurrection apparently assumed a much more unhistorical form, with accounts of earthquakes, angels, and stones being rolled away. It is true that the borderline between a vision of a person who is truly living beyond death and that contains tactile elements, and that of a person actually raised from death, but appearing only to his faithful followers (Acts 10:39–41), begins to seem quite slender. However, the account of the empty tomb and the disappearance of the body of Jesus are testimony that the early witnesses clearly meant us to understand that something happened to the *body* of Jesus and not just his spirit. If we are relying on the available evidence this must be given considerable weight.

The arguments are set out here for the sake of honesty. If Christians are to believe in the resurrection it must be in the face of some strong objections to it. Honesty requires this. These arguments against, however, remain mere hypotheses and suppositions that are suggested without evidence and are to be contrasted with the evidential nature of the claim to resurrection. Human

psychology is difficult enough to interpret in the present, let alone after an interval of two thousand years and in the case of people to whom we have no direct access, so speculative psychological theories are at a disadvantage and tend to fall apart when probed more deeply. The lack of evidence of a historical kind is surely significant, especially in an age when all manner of claims are meant to be “evidence-based.” Having rehearsed the arguments against, the Christian is entitled to feel that they still fall short of adequately explaining the dramatic and pivotal events that took place after the crucifixion and to which the original eye-witnesses were soberly committed. The fact that their experiences were repeated, corporate, and multiply attested counts against their being “explained” in these ways.

### THE RISEN CHRIST

After his death on the cross the original followers of Jesus were persuaded that he had risen from the dead and that once more he was present with them. The appearances of Jesus as the conqueror of death were of limited duration for a good reason. They made it clear that not just anybody could now claim to be an authenticated witness to the resurrection, but only those who had been with him “from the beginning” (Acts 1:21–26). The only exception to this was the apostle Paul, who, as we know, had to struggle to establish his position among the primary witnesses. It is their testimony that constitutes the normative version of the Christian faith that we here endeavor to set out. Yet through the Spirit Christ is present in the midst of those faith-communities that embrace and trust him and believe that he has been raised from the dead. This is both the starting point and the central point for our understanding of Christian convictions, the hub at the centre of the wheel from which all the spokes ultimately derive.

### GUIDING CRITERIA

In investigating the truth of Christian convictions there are several criteria that need to be applied. One concerns the *coherence* of what is claimed: in other words, do Christian convictions make sense in themselves or are they internally self-contradictory or without sense? A second criterion is that of *correspondence*: do they describe reality as it actually is or are they out of kilter with what is experienced of the world around us, or indeed, the spiritual realm that in a Christian worldview is discernible beyond it? The third criterion is that of *congruence*: do our convictions resonate with what we know of God in Jesus Christ, who is risen from the dead and is found

within our communities? Are we being true to Christ, faithful to what he taught and enacted, or do we miss the mark? At this point we need to pay particular attention to the fact that the resurrection is the resurrection of the historical Jesus. The Jesus of history did not become lost in the resurrected Jesus as though we can regard his earthly life as now unnecessary, swallowed up in the glory of the exalted one. To the contrary, the life of Jesus is given new meaning and prominence precisely because he is the one who is marked out by God. Everything he did and said is to be given our fullest attention. These criteria, but especially the last, will guide us as we attempt to think *Christianly* about the convictions that uphold us and make us what we are.

As has been indicated, for the sake of simplicity of presentation it is not the intention in this book to refer to other literature except on rare occasions. However, a significant and explicit quotation directly relevant to our theme is available in the writings of an ancient Jewish historian contemporary with the early church. This is Flavius Josephus (37 AD—post 100 AD), who wrote in his history of the Jewish people:

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples, did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly, he was thought to be the Messiah (the Christ) concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders. And the people of the Christians, named after him, have not disappeared till this day.  
(*Antiquities of the Jewish People* 18:63–64).

Much debate has surrounded this passage in Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jewish People*. The general belief is that the Greek version of this text has been interpolated by a later Christian scribe adding in some more affirmative and Christian-biased statements about Jesus. However, the quotation above is from the less well known and more recently discovered Arabic version, which shows no signs of interpolation: The translation in this form is taken from the Jewish scholar David Flusser.<sup>2</sup> This summary by a near contemporary of Jesus' life, death, and claimed resurrection, but one who was not himself a believer, is both significant and accurate. No Christian would wish to disagree with it.

2. Flusser, *The Sage from Galilee*, 147–48.