

The Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus



The Apostle Paul asserts:

"If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is in vain and your faith is in vain.¹ [And we are even found to be false witnesses about God, because we have testified about God that he raised Christ ... If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished — **author's addition**]" (1 Corinthians 15:14–18).

What unfolds after the sabbath rest, when the women visit Jesus' tomb, varies by Gospel:

"In Matthew, there is an earthquake; an angel descends from heaven, rolls away the stone blocking the tomb's entrance (**a natural occurrence**), and sits on it. In Mark, when they arrive, the stone has already been rolled away (**cause unknown**), and inside a young man in white sits on the right. In Luke, the stone is likewise already rolled away (**cause unknown**), and inside stand two men in dazzling garments. In John, seeing that the stone has been moved (**by human agency**), they call the disciples to verify it; after the disciples depart, Mary remains weeping, bends to look in, and sees two angels in white, one seated at the head and the

other at the feet.”²

Thus the accounts differ on how many visitors came, whether those present inside were **humans** or **angels**, whether they were **sitting** or **standing**, and whether the open tomb resulted from **natural forces** or **human action**.

It becomes apparent that the resurrection narratives underwent additions and edits over a long period. Although the order of Gospel composition runs Mark, Luke, then John, the stories about the resurrection seem to have been emended in the **reverse** order—John, then Luke, then Mark. This makes it clear that these are not simple records of fact, but accounts adjusted for convenience.

Luke’s note that Peter went to the tomb and saw the linen cloths appears to be a compressed borrowing from John; and the staged meeting between the risen Jesus and Peter in John 21 seems intended to spotlight Peter’s role. In fact, John 20 ends with words that clearly **conclude** the book (“These are written...”); this makes it highly likely that John 21 was inserted later to exalt Peter.

Ask how many days it was before Jesus rose, and most will answer, “three.” Intriguingly, only Matthew and Luke link this to Jonah in the Old Testament. “Matthew 12:39–40 says, ‘A wicked and adulterous generation seeks a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.’ Awkwardly, however, Jesus remained only **one day and two nights**; not the seventy-two hours Matthew posits, but about **thirty-six hours** (Friday night, Saturday, and Saturday night), according to the claim that at **dawn on Sunday** the tomb was already found empty.”³



Paul writes that after rising Jesus “appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the **Twelve**” (1 Corinthians 15:5)—as if Judas Iscariot were still included. This suggests Paul was unaware of the betrayal narrative found in the Gospels, which specify that Jesus appeared to the **eleven** (Matt 28:16; Mark 16:14; Luke 24:33). It follows that the story of Judas’s betrayal, as told in the Gospels, may be a later addition.

As for how long Jesus remained after rising: Matthew and Mark make it hard to infer any number of days; Luke suggests **two days**; John, **ten days**; and Acts mentions **forty days**. Since each author reports a different duration, the Gospel accounts are difficult to trust.

Consider Luke’s ascension passage: “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. As he blessed them, he parted from them **(and was carried up into heaven); (and they worshiped him)** and returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (Luke 24:50–52). A note indicates that some manuscripts **omit** the bracketed phrases. If so, the claims that the risen Jesus **ascended** to

heaven rest only on the later-added resurrection ending of Mark and on the bracketed clauses in Luke.



In other words, the earliest Gospel materials mention the resurrection only **in part**, and **do not** record an ascension. Given that the New Testament would lose its rationale without the resurrection and ascension, this is a crucial section—yet the muddled, jumbled accounts provide few meaningful clues.

Sources

1. *Journey Together*, Archdiocese of Seoul Pastoral Office, Catholic Publishing House, 1995, p. 67.
2. *Thomas Paine Collection*, Forgotten Books, 2007, pp. 423–424 (edited with author's notes).

3. *Thomas Paine Collection*, Forgotten Books, 2007, p. 436 (edited with author's notes).