

When and where did the resurrected Jesus first appear?

The Bible offers conflicting answers.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue



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This Easter, a great many sermons will focus on the risen Jesus meeting Mary Magdalene in the garden. It's a profoundly moving tale that has inspired artists and authors through the centuries.

Mary's story, however, is not the church's earliest canonical account of Jesus' first resurrection appearance. The story of Mary Magdalene being the first to encounter the risen Christ arises later than another account in the New Testament tradition.

So if not in the garden with Mary on the third day, when and where did the supposed events occur? Christians believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day—but this does not necessarily mean that the first resurrection *appearance* happened that day. Two key words suggest a quite different interpretation in the early church.

The first is *Peter*. The earliest sources indicate that Jesus' first resurrection appearance was to him. The oldest language is recalled in the formula in Luke 24:34: "The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Note the earlier form of Peter's name.

More substantially, 1 Corinthians 15 is the oldest and most authoritative statement of what the very first Christians believed. Paul is repeating a kind of credal statement, which he must have acquired in Jerusalem within a decade of the crucifixion. It tells us that the resurrected Jesus was first "seen by Cephas" (15:5), and the form of the name again indicates that this is a primitive statement, which likely originated in Aramaic. These are the words of the pre-Gospels Jesus movement—in fact, the pre-Paul movement. The passage also includes stories that were clearly important at the time, such as the appearances to James and to the 500, which vanished from our tradition by the end of the first century.

The other key word is *Galilee*. At key points in the Gospels, we read predictions that the risen Jesus will appear to his followers in Galilee. That is the prediction in the early account in Mark 16, which the other Gospels recall—before inserting their stories of events in Jerusalem.

The Gospel writers faced an intractable problem. From the church's earliest creeds they knew that Jesus rose on the third day. So soon after the crucifixion, this implied a Jerusalem setting. But they also knew that the first recorded appearance was to Peter in Galilee. They tried to reconcile the two narratives by building up the accounts of what supposedly happened on the third day, in Jerusalem at the tomb. You can actually use this feature to date New Testament texts: the more attention they give to appearances in Jerusalem, the later they were written.

So have we lost the earliest resurrection appearance, or has it just been displaced from where it originally appeared? I would argue the latter: it appears in multiple locations within the Gospels as we now have them. (This displacement idea is not new; it was famously proposed by Rudolf Bultmann.)

The main candidate for such a displaced first appearance is the account of Jesus' visit to the disciples at the Sea of Galilee, which now appears in John's Gospel, in chapter 21. In its current placement it is a puzzling passage, as it directly follows the end of chapter 20, which was clearly intended as a definitive conclusion to the whole Gospel. As an appearance to Peter in Galilee, it exactly fits the early prediction from Mark, recalled in the other Gospels.

This passage also fills another gap in the New Testament. The Gospel of Mark as it survives today is missing its ending, and it also lacks a resurrection appearance, as distinct from a foretelling of one. Was this lost portion of Mark perhaps something very much like the Sea of Galilee scene in John 21? Supporting this idea, the once very popular Gospel of Peter, from the second century, preserves something very much like that proposed sequence, as it moves directly from the setting of Mark 16 to the disciples going fishing on the Sea of Galilee.

That Galilee scene finds an uncanny echo in another well-known passage that is presently portrayed as a miracle story rather than a resurrection appearance. Three Gospels record the story of Jesus walking on the water, and in many details, each account clearly echoes the John 21 passage (Mark 6:47-51; Matt. 14:22-33; John 6:16-21). Particularly in Matthew's telling, the language recalls other scenes that certainly do have a resurrection context. Jesus tells his followers not to be afraid, "It's me" (or "I am," *ego eimi*). The disciples worship Jesus (*prosekunesan*), saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God!" This fits a resurrection appearance far better than a mere miracle, even a spectacular one. So also do Jesus' words to Peter: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" The accusation may be that Peter is doubting the resurrection, not just Jesus' skills on the rough waves.

The first recorded resurrection appearance can indeed be found in the Gospels, but it is hiding in plain sight. As we commemorate Easter this year, we should certainly tell the story of Mary Magdalene. But it's worth also emphasizing the Sea of Galilee—just as much as the Jerusalem garden.