On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; The Nicene Creed

The Doctrine of the Resurrection is, quite simply, the Christian belief that Christ is risen from death.

It has often been claimed that the most convincing argument for the Resurrection of Jesus is the existence of the Church because this doctrine is not a belief which grew up within the Church, it is the belief around which the Church grew up.

After the death of Jesus the disciples were broken and disillusioned men and women; they were ‘orphaned’ (Saint John’s phrase) of their Master.

Suddenly all that changed. Jesus, they claimed, was alive and they could point to members of their own company who had seen and spoken to the Risen Lord.

Twenty years later Saint Paul wrote: ‘..that Christ died; that he was buried; that he was raised to life on the third day; and that he appeared to Peter and afterwards to the Twelve. Then he appeared to over five hundred of our brothers at once, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.’ 1 Corinthians 15:3-6.

Saint Paul’s invitation is obvious: ‘If you don’t believe it, go and ask them. Ask those who saw it for themselves!’

What actually happened?

Nowhere in the New Testament is there any attempt to describe how the Resurrection actually happened.

The writers of the Gospels and the Epistles were concerned with proclamation, not explanation. But they do give us some clues and from those clues we can deduce two important facts.

First, the tomb was empty.

The Gospels describe how, on the morning of the third day, some disciples went to the tomb and found the body of Jesus had gone.

The story is told in meticulous detail but it is never told as a proof that Jesus is Risen. In fact the Gospel writers tend to minimise the story and Saint Paul never mentions it at all. They surely realised that the fact of the empty tomb had as much to do with the Resurrection as the empty cocoon has to do with a butterfly. Their interest was in the butterfly, not the cocoon.

Secondly, Jesus was seen alive.

Mary of Magdala saw the Risen Lord. On the road to Emmaus two disciples saw the Risen Lord. When the disciples were together in Jerusalem they saw the Risen Lord. Beside the Sea of Tiberius, again, they saw the Risen Lord.

At first they didn’t recognise him. Mary mistook him for the gardener. The two disciples on the Emmaus road didn’t recognise him until he broke bread with them. The fishermen didn’t recognise him when he encouraged them to cast their net one more time.

This would seem to suggest that the Risen Lord was different to the Jesus of their previous experience. When Saint Paul wrote of these appearances he used a special word - opthe - which indicated that the Jesus who showed himself to the disciples belonged to an order of things different from the world of our ordinary experience.

We should also remember that the appearances are not described in the language of science. The New Testament writers were describing events which took
place at the extreme edge of normal human experience and their language is therefore justifiably elusive and tantalising.

But one thing is sure. Those who saw the Risen Lord knew, with overwhelming certainty, that Jesus was alive, risen from death.

The meaning of the Resurrection

History does not consist of bare facts. Just as important is the meaning of those facts.

If those first witnesses had to employ hesitant language in describing the facts of the Resurrection, they had no such hesitation when it came to proclaiming the meaning of those facts. For suddenly, everything else, even the death of Jesus, began to make sense.

They saw that his ministry had not been a failure. God had put his stamp of approval on everything Jesus had said and done.

They saw who Jesus really was - the promised Lord and Christ who would usher in the New Age of God’s Rule.

They saw that they, themselves, could participate in the New Age; that God in Christ was re-creating humanity and that they were the first fruits of that re-creation.

But most of all, they knew that God’s presence in Christ had not been taken from them.

The Ascension

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

*The Nicene Creed*

It is not helpful to think of the Resurrection and the Ascension as two separate events.

Nor is it helpful to think of the Ascension as a ‘going up’ event.

For Saint John and Saint Paul the Risen Christ was also the Ascended Christ - or, more correctly, the Exalted Christ. The Jesus who appeared to the disciples was already ‘seated at the right hand of the Father’.

Only Saint Luke suggests that Jesus spent forty days as the Risen Christ before he ‘was taken up’ to be with the Father and this suggestion has unfortunately led to a number of misunderstandings about both the Resurrection and the Ascension.

It has encouraged the belief that the Risen Christ somehow remained in hiding for forty days, occasionally venturing forth to show himself to his chosen disciples, until he eventually went up to heaven to be with God. In fact Saint Luke is saying something very different to that.

Saint Luke is the author, both of the Gospel bearing his name and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. It was his declared intention to write ‘an orderly account’ (see Luke 1:3) of the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus and of the beginnings of the Church.

His suggestion that the Ascension took place forty days after the Resurrection adds nothing to our understanding of the Risen Christ. It does, however, announce an end to his appearances, thereby clearing the stage for the next chapter in Luke’s ‘orderly account’; the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The meaning of the Ascension

If the Resurrection and the Ascension should not be distinguished as two separate events, they must certainly be distinguished in meaning.

The Doctrine of the Resurrection asserts that Christ is Risen.

The Doctrine of the Ascension asserts something very different; that Christ now shares in the rule of God over all creation.

The phrase ‘at the right hand of the Father’ refers not to a place, but to the disciples’ belief that Jesus had been exalted to his rightful glory and that, from glory, he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Think about it

*No Resurrection. No Christianity.*

- Archbishop Michael Ramsey

*The Ascension of Christ is his liberation from all the restrictions of time and space. It does not represent his removal from the earth, but his constant presence everywhere on earth.*

- Archbishop William Temple