

# Easter in the 21st Century.

*By*

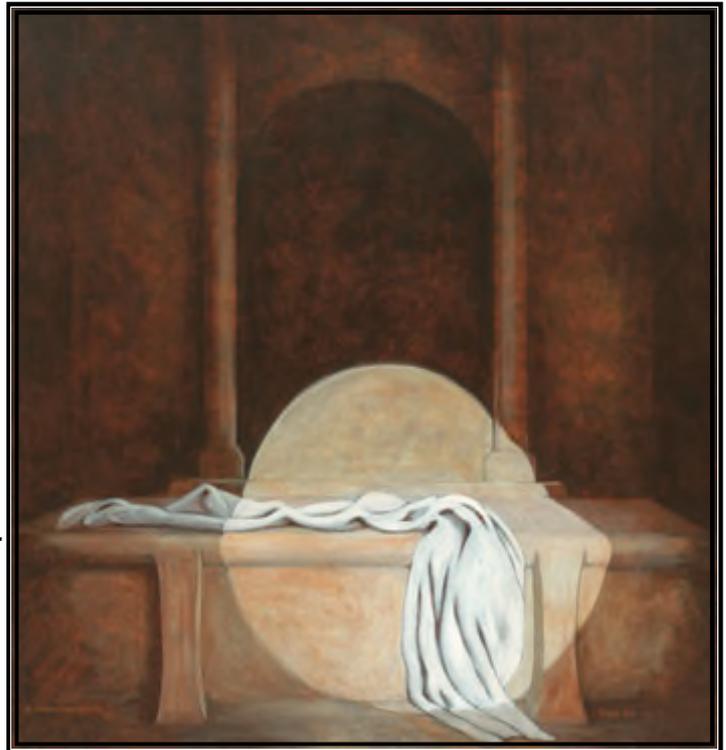
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*A study of the Easter story and  
how it fits into the present day  
world of science & technology*

## Introduction:

Easter is the most important religious celebration in the life of the Christian. The Easter story is at the heart of the Christian faith. For centuries those who have professed to be faithful followers of Jesus of Nazareth have declared that their beliefs are dependant upon understanding Jesus as the risen Christ. He is described in the Biblical texts and Christian writings as '*Son of God*', '*Messiah*', '*Son of Man*', etc. all of which are meant to convey the 'truth' that Jesus is God's corrective for the presence of sin and evil in a world God created to be 'good'.



The theology of Easter developed gradually over the first few hundred years of the Jesus Movement until it became the focus for the celebration of Jesus death which pays the price for the forgiveness of human sin, and the bodily resurrection, which confirms the reality of Jesus divine nature.

Today, we live in a world where most humans in the technologically advanced Western Nations no longer look to the Church and its belief system to find meaning and purpose for life. Instead the world of science and technology with its concentration on proofs and factual evidence dominates. If one cannot find a way to verify the truth of something, if it cannot be explained, then the modern scientific paradigm dismisses it as unreal or false.

So then, does the Easter story and message still have value in this modern world? There are well respected theologians and experienced clergy who have publicly stated disbelief in some, if not all, of the accepted tenets of the Easter Faith. They have been vilified by some for their statements and applauded by others. But, is it really possible to support what they state and remain Christians? Or must we hold to the sentiment behind the great old hymn "Give me that old time religion, if it's good enough for Jesus, then it's good enough for me"?

In this study we will look at the Easter story & the resurrection theology central to the Christian church for these last two millennia, the statements of men and women who hold opinions on both sides, and finally - ask the question - what does Easter mean to me in 2008?

## STUDY 1:

### *The Easter Story.*

*“We may be Protestants or Catholics, Lutherans or Reformed, to the right or to the left, but in some way we must have seen and heard the angels at the open and empty tomb if we are to be sure of our ground.”*

**Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics***

#### Introduction:

Karl Barth, the great German theologian, in this quote from his most influential work, *Church Dogmatics*, is making clear his belief that if we claim to be a Christian, no matter what brand, then at some point in our faith journey the Easter story of the empty tomb has been a fundamental influence on us.

Barth believed implicitly in the real power and truth of the resurrection as the central tenet of the Christian Faith. Without it, Jesus cannot be ‘Son of God’, the salvation offered in him by God does not exist, and the Christian faith has no validity beyond a series of ethical and moral statements for application to our daily lives.

If this is so, then the Easter story contained in the texts in the four Gospels is the most important narrative for all who claim to be Christians.

#### *TASK ONE. -*

*Discuss Barth’s statement about the importance of the Easter story to the believer’s faith - and, decide if you agree.*

#### The Texts.

The general consensus of Biblical scholars is that the four Gospels we have in our Bible were written over a thirty or forty year period in the 1st. Century of the Common Era (C.E.). Mark *circa* 65CE, Matthew *c.* 70CE, Luke *c.* 80CE and John *c.* 90CE. Other source materials are believed to have had an influence, including the Gospel of Thomas and the *Q (Quelle)* source. These would have been based on stories that circulated among early followers of Jesus.

So *STORY* is very important.

#### *TASK TWO -*

*On the facing blank page take a few minutes to write down the *STORY* of Easter Sunday as you might tell it to someone who has never heard it.*

Telling the stories.

We have seen how in the retelling of the resurrection narrative in our own words it can be difficult to find continuity. Yet, the Easter narrative is undoubtedly one of the two most often read and listened to by Christians.

**TASK THREE -**

*What reasons might there be to explain the lack of detail and consistency in our telling of this familiar story. Are we just no good at telling tales? Or perhaps we don't take in what we hear or what we read.*

*Are there any other reasons you can think of?*

Comparing the narratives.

We can best understand one of the most probable reasons for this difficulty by employing one of the tools of the Biblical scholar - comparing the texts.

We will do this now by looking at three aspects of the story in each text - *a) the discovery narratives, b) the appearances narratives, c) the resolution.*

THE DISCOVERY

<u>Gospel of Mark</u>	<u>Gospel of Matthew</u>	<u>Gospel of Luke</u>	<u>Gospel of John</u>
<p><b>Ch.16.</b> When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.                  2. and very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.                  3. they had been saying to one another "who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"                  4. when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large had already been rolled back.</p>	<p><b>Ch.28.</b> After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.                  2. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.</p>	<p><b>Ch.24.</b> But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.                  2. they found that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb,                  3. but when they went in, they did not see the body.</p>	<p><b>Ch.20.</b> Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.                  2. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."                  3. Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.                  4. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.                  5. he bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.                  6. Then Simon Peter came, following him and went in to the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,                  7. and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.                  8. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;                  9. for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead                  10. Then the disciples returned to their homes.</p>

**TASK FOUR-**

*Look at each of the gospel descriptions of the discovery of the empty tomb on the previous page, and list below some of the differences - remember that Matthew has some Roman guards standing outside the tomb as these events take place.*

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**THE APPEARANCES**

<u>Gospel of Mark</u>	<u>Gospel of Matthew</u>	<u>Gospel of Luke</u>	<u>Gospel of John</u>
<p><b>Ch.16:</b> 5.As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.          6. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed: you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised, He is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.          7. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.          8. So they went and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.</p>	<p><b>Ch.28:</b> 3. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.          4. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.          5. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.          6. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come see the place where he lay.          7. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him. This is my message for you.'          8. So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples.          9. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him.          10. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."</p>	<p><b>Ch.24.:</b> 4. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.          5. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, he has risen.          6. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,          7. that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again?"          8. Then they remembered his words,          9. and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.          10. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told the apostles.          11. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.          12. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what happened.</p>	<p><b>Ch.20.:</b>11. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;          12. and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet,          13. They said to her "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them "They have taken my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him."          14. When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus.          15. Jesus said to her "Woman why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away."          16. Jesus said to her "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!".          17. Jesus said to her "Do not hold me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."          18. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.</p>

## Discovery & Appearances

Each of the gospel writers tells the story of the discovery of the empty tomb and the confrontation with Jesus and the various heavenly beings differently. Different people appear at different times doing different things in different ways!

However, if you read the texts again, you will find considerable similarities between the gospel narratives.

### *TASK FIVE-*

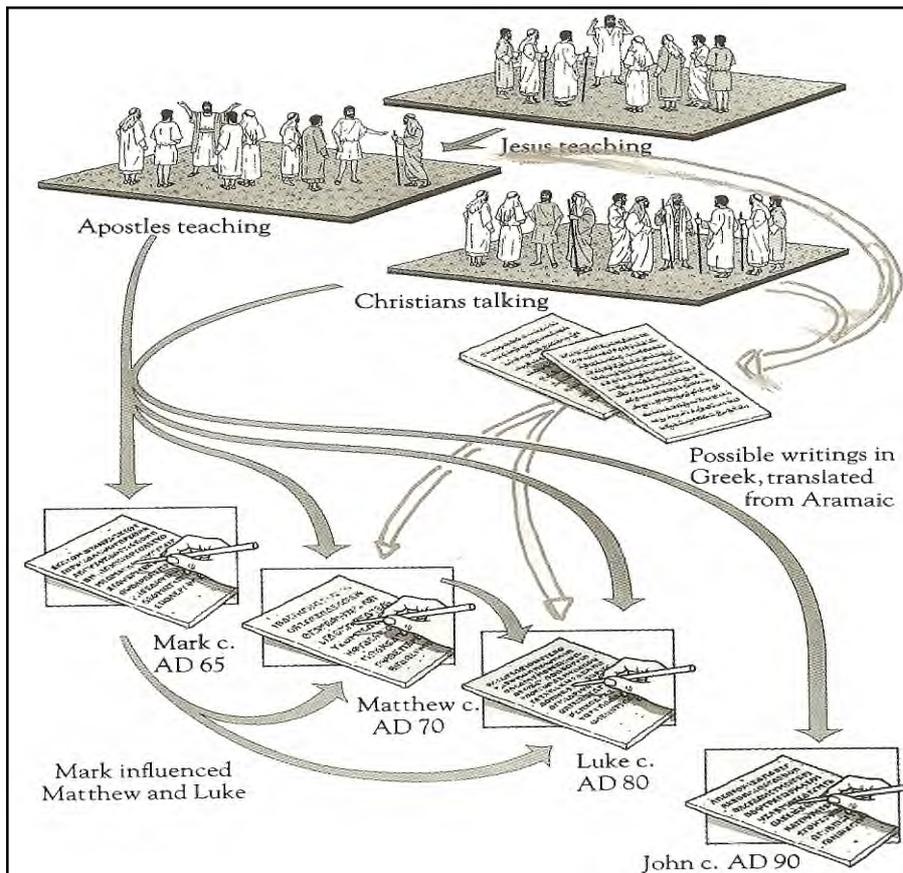
*Go back over the two comparative textual analyses and using a pen, pencil or marker - emphasise sentences, or parts of sentences, in each gospel that appear to be the same. Then, check out sentences that appear similar - then see if you can re-arrange some of the verses to make them similar to other verses in the other gospels.*

*What might this process indicate to you about how each gospel was written?*

There are a number of possible reasons for these similarities - the obvious one is that they are telling the same story, so of course they will be the same. However, how likely is it that two people telling the same story will use almost exactly the same words, but then get the people involved mixed up!?

One of the indications to trained interrogators that people are fabricating a story is that they tell it in the same words. This points to collusion.

The reason Biblical scholars believe these similarities exist is because the writers of the gospels used the same sources! The reason the characters and other factors differ is because the gospel writers wrote their Easter stories to influence their readers to take upon themselves the particular perspective of the faith they wanted to communicate.



**Fig. 1.**

The process by which the stories about Jesus and some of the things he said would have been handed down from follower to follower.

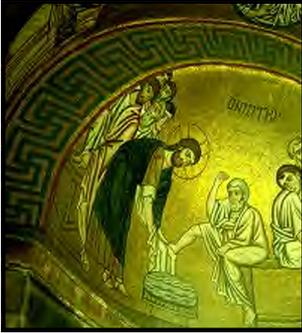
Firstly by word, then perhaps in letters or other writings (like those of Paul, the earliest of the NT writings), until the first attempts to gather the whole story in writing.

As well as the gospels we have in the Biblical canon, we have the Gospel of Thomas, and someday we might even find a document containing some or all of the 'Q' source material!

**TASK SIX-**

*Look at some of the comparative text describing the third aspect of the Easter story in the four gospels - **The Resolution** - Can you find any indication from what is written what it is the gospel writers want you to take from the Easter story?*

<u>Gospel of Mark</u>	<u>Gospel of Matthew</u>	<u>Gospel of Luke</u>	<u>Gospel of John</u>
<p><b>Ch.16:</b> 9. Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons.            10. she went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping.            11. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.            12. After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking in the country.            13. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.            14. Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen,            15. And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.            16. The one who believes and is baptised will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned....."</p>	<p><b>Ch.28:</b> 11. they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened.            12. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers,            13. telling them, "You must say, 'his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'            14. "If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."            15. So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews today.            16. Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them            17. When they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted.            18. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me.            19. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,            20. and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.</p>	<p><b>Ch.24.:</b> <i>(vv. 13-35 tell the story of the walk to Emmaus)</i>            36. While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them "Peace be with you."            37. They were startled and terrified, and thought that they had seen a ghost.            38. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?            39. Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself.            40. And when he had said this he showed them his hands and his feet.            41. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them "Have you anything here to eat?"            42. They gave him a piece of broiled fish,            43. and he ate it in their presence.            44. Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you. - that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled"            45. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,            46. and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day            47. and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.            48. You are witnesses of these things.            49. And see I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."</p>	<p><b>Ch.20.:</b> 19. When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said "Peace be with you."            20. After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.            21. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."            22. When he had said this he breathed on them and said to them "Receive the Holy Spirit,            23. if you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."            24. but Thomas, (who was called the twin) one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.            25. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."            26. A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said "Peace be with you."            27. Then he said to Thomas "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and out it in my side. Do not doubt but believe!"            28. Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"            29. Jesus said to him "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."            30. Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.            31. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and believing you may have life in his name.</p>



We have examined each of the biblical gospels and compared how they describe the main events of Easter Sunday.

The discovery of the empty tomb, the appearances of Jesus and the 'heavenly' figures to those who make the discoveries, and finally, what happened when the discovery was communicated to the other followers of Jesus.



We see how the stories of Easter Sunday differ markedly in detail and purpose.



**TASK SEVEN -**

*How must these stories seem, as we head into the third millennia of the common era, to those who have little or no connection with Church? Do you know anyone of your acquaintance who finds difficulty in believing the Easter miracles Karl Barth says is so important to our faith? Can you understand why they feel that way?*



**The Whole Story.**

We have concentrated on the texts describing the Easter Sunday story purely because of the restriction of time.

It is extremely important that any attempt to communicate and understand Easter in today's world includes all aspects of the final week of Jesus life, but particularly the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

*These cannot be separated as tools to explain the Easter phenomenon.*

**Conclusion -**

Jesus Christ Superstar was a big influence on the 70's generation. The music, the images and the power of the message— *How would the movie be accepted today?* Is the message always the same - or is it presented differently for each new generation?

Next time we will examine the 'meaning'(s) the 'theology'(s) of Easter.

Which relates best to you? Would that understanding fit for most people today?