

Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus

1. What are the resurrection and ascension of Jesus?

Although there is widespread agreement among Christians and non-Christians that Jesus died by crucifixion, atheists and followers of other religions reject the belief that he was raised from the dead and, after that, ascended into heaven. Notwithstanding this, historians concede that something happened after Jesus's death: some of his followers had experiences that convinced them of the resurrection. Although it is impossible to ascertain their nature, perhaps some disciples suffered hallucinations or visions triggered by profound grief. These are the types of explanations offered by non-Christians. However, for Christians, the resurrection and ascension are historical facts: they really happened.

Resurrection

The event at which Jesus rose from the dead and left his tomb empty shortly after his death and burial.

Ascension

The event at which the disciples witnessed Jesus raised up into heaven shortly after his resurrection.



The resurrection: the moment at which Christians believe Jesus conquered death.

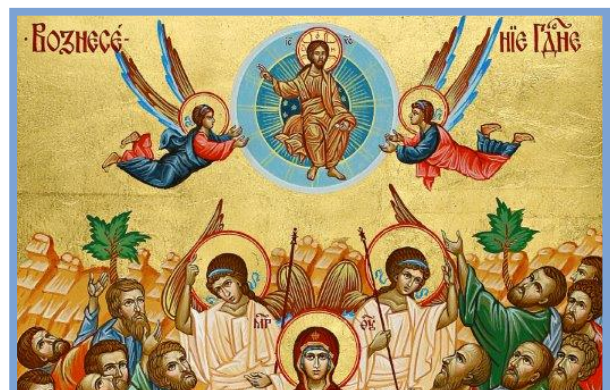
Resurrection: the gospels do not provide accounts of the moment of Jesus's resurrection. Instead, according to Luke 24:1-3, readers learn that those who discovered the empty tomb "found the stone rolled away... but when they went in, they did not find the body." So, after the burial of Jesus, the next widely attested story assumes the resurrection with the discovery of his empty tomb.

Ascension: Luke 24:51-53 reports the ascension with the words, "While [Jesus] was blessing [the disciples], he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." Christians claim that all the gospels assume the ascension, although only Luke's records it. These verses are significant to claims that Jesus was bodily resurrected rather than seen during a visionary experience.

2. How do the resurrection and ascension of Jesus work?

Resurrection: the first thing to note is that Christians believe that Jesus genuinely returned from the grave. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-6, Paul the Apostle writes, "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and... he was buried and... he was raised on the third day". He knew this was an extraordinary claim, but Jesus's followers had seen him: "he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time." There is no doubt from the writings of Paul the Apostle that people believed Jesus was actually, physically raised from the dead; it is what was anticipated in the Old Testament, and eyewitness accounts of the risen Jesus confirmed it. The gospels of Matthew, Luke and John even record some of these appearances, including physical encounters with the disciples and influential female followers of Jesus.

Ascension: Acts of the Apostles, which is traditionally attributed to the author of Luke's Gospel and can loosely be described as a gospel of the disciples, tells readers that Jesus ascended physically into heaven. In Acts 1:9-11 readers learn that "When [Jesus] had said this, as [the disciples] were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee... This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." This account simultaneously reinforces the belief that Jesus will return in the future for the Last Judgement; he was taken up into heaven on a cloud, and he will return on a cloud to judge the living and the dead.



The ascension

3. **Why** are the resurrection and ascension of Jesus important?

The resurrection and ascension are both of tremendous theological significance. In other words, they inform the Christian view about what God is like. First, for Christians, the resurrection confirms that Jesus is God the Son: he is the second person of the Trinity, responsible for saving humanity from the consequences of sin. Second, it is proof that Jesus's death on the cross restored the relationship between God and humanity. It demonstrates that Jesus's death had the saving power Christians claim. Third, it tells Christians what to expect at the general resurrection before the Last Judgement: there will be an actual, bodily resurrection just like the one experienced by Jesus. This is something underscored by the account of the ascension in Acts of the Apostles: Jesus ascends into heaven, and readers learn that, in just the same way, he will eventually descend at his second coming (i.e. the Last Judgement). Finally, the resurrection and ascension end the narrative of Holy Week, the week immediately before Easter, and Jesus's life more generally. For Christians, the events of this week give the broader gospel story its authority and force. These events demonstrate Jesus's divinity, which means, working backwards to the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of Holy Week or still further to Jesus's teachings from the start and middle of his ministry, we should follow his commandments: they are the words of God.

George Thinks

What are the most important things for us to remember about the resurrection and ascension of Jesus? Well, first and foremost, they're the other half of the crucifixion: the proof, as far as Christians are concerned, that what they claim the death of Jesus accomplished was, indeed, achieved. Because the crucifixion is the sacrifice required to save humanity from the consequence of sin and restore the relationship with God. For Christians, the resurrection proves this happened. Beyond that, it's a model for what Christians can expect at the general resurrection when the Last Judgement happens. It gives Christians hope that they will be resurrected and transformed by God and that they'll enjoy eternity with him in heaven, just like Jesus did after his own resurrection and ascension. However, the resurrection and ascension are also two of the miracles that atheists and non-Christians are most sceptical about. They wonder whether they are merely tall stories embellished from hallucinations or visions that the disciples suffered in their grief-stricken state. What's more likely, they would argue, that the laws of nature were violated and death defeated, or that some disciples mistook visionary experiences for real encounters with a physically resurrected Jesus? Wherever the truth lies, undoubtedly, it is belief in this pair of events that moved the earliest Christians to confirm their faith in Jesus.

