

When I was a kid I loved doing connect-the-dots pictures. You start with a bunch of numbered points on a page. And then as you trace a line from point to point, a bigger picture emerges.

In the New Testament, there is one particular Easter story like that. It's about James. There are 4 different Jameses in the New Testament. Two of the 12 disciples were named James. But this James is different. This one is Jesus' brother, James. He's also called James of Jerusalem and James the Just. This James's Easter story is made up of a series of dots in different books. But when you connect them all together, a larger picture emerges.

But because these dots about James are scattered we never hear about his story in its entirety in our readings. Instead, our readings around Easter focus on the events of Easter day. Last Sunday we read from Mark's Gospel about the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning. Today we heard from John's Gospel about the event of Easter night and from the Sunday a week later that focuses heavily on the Apostle Thomas. Next week we'll hear another account of Easter night from the Gospel of Luke.

But today, I want to tease out the story of James. In our Epistle lesson last Sunday, we got one of the dots about James. In 1Corinthians 15, Paul tells us that the first thing he received, the first thing he learned or was taught as a Christian, was that Jesus Christ died, and was buried, and was then raised from death.¹

And then Paul gives the earliest list extant of the witnesses to the Resurrection. He mentions the risen Jesus appearing to the Apostles.² He mentions the risen Christ appearing to more than 500 witnesses at one time, most of whom were still alive when he wrote 1Corinthians.³

But Paul also explicitly names two of the witnesses to the resurrection. He says that Jesus appeared to Cephas, which is the Aramaic form of the Greek name Petros, in English, Peter.⁴ Also, Paul says, the risen Christ appeared to James.⁵

So as Paul recounts what he first learned as a Christian, he explicitly mentions the resurrected Jesus appearing to Peter and James. Dot #1.

Dot #2 was written a few years earlier by Paul when he wrote Galatians. In Galatians Paul talks about his conversion. He then talks about his early days as a Christian, and the first trip he makes back to Jerusalem as a Christian. He says that he visited Peter and stayed with him for 15 days.⁶ And the only other apostle he met with on that trip was "James the Lord's brother."⁷

¹ 1Cor 15:3-4

² 1Cor 15:7

³ 1Cor 15:6

⁴ 1Cor 15:5

⁵ 1Cor 15:7

⁶ Gal 1:18

⁷ Gal 1:19

So why in 1Corinthians does Paul explicitly mention Peter and James in the list of the witnesses to the resurrection? Probably because when Paul met with both Peter and James very early on and heard their accounts of meeting the risen Christ from their own lips.

Unfortunately, there is no account anywhere of what it was like when the resurrected Jesus first appeared his brother James. I wish that story had been preserved somewhere, but it hasn't.

What we can do is look at the cluster of dots about James before the resurrection. And then we can look at the cluster of dots about James after the resurrection.

Before the resurrection, during Jesus' ministry, James and Jesus' other siblings pop up several times.

Quick side-note. The Gospels name 4 of Jesus brothers: James, Joses, Simon, & Jude;⁸ plus they mention his unnamed sisters, plural, which would indicate at least 2.⁹

These are most likely younger siblings of Jesus born to Mary and Joseph later on. However, amongst Christians that like to view Mary as a perpetual virgin, they would deny that Mary had any other children. They suggest that these siblings are Jesus' older step-brothers and sisters who were Joseph's children from a previous marriage.

In any event, in the Gospels, these siblings are NOT portrayed as followers of Jesus in any way, shape, or form.

In Mark, they're downright hostile to his ministry—they show up and try to stop Jesus—they think he's gone out of his mind.¹⁰

John says point blank that his brothers did not believe in him.¹¹

And in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when Jesus is told his family wants to see him, he claims that his real family is made up of his disciples.¹² In fact, in Luke he adds, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."¹³

And in John's Gospel, as Jesus is dying on the cross, he entrusts the care of his mother to a disciple, a member of his new family, the church, rather than entrusting her to his old family.¹⁴

⁸ Mt 13:55, or Mk 6:3—there are slight variations with 2 names Joseph/Joses, and Jude/Judas

⁹ Mt 13:56, or Mk 3:31, or Mk 6:3

¹⁰ Mk 3:21

¹¹ Jn 7:5

¹² Mt 12:46-49, Mk 3:31-34, Lk 8:19-21

¹³ Lk 8:21

¹⁴ Jn 19:25-27

So during Jesus' ministry up through his crucifixion, all the dots about James, the brother of Jesus, point the same direction. There is no indication James was a disciple or a believer in his brother. In fact he may have thought his brother was acting crazy and needed to stop doing what he was doing. He certainly was not one of his brother's disciples.

What's remarkable is the very different set of dots in the rest of the New Testament.

In the book of Acts, Luke talks about the period, between the Ascension and the day of Pentecost. In other words, this is between 40 and 50 days after the resurrection. Luke names the 11 remaining disciples who are now apostles. And he says this about them:

"All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers."¹⁵

This is a switch. It's a big switch. Jesus' brothers are now gathering in prayer with the rest of his followers.

What's more, about 11 years later, the first of these apostles is killed. It is James, the son of Zebedee, the brother of John. Peter and James and John were often regarded as the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. Now James is dead. And a new James takes his place: James the brother of Jesus takes the place of James the son of Zebedee as one of the "big three". Within a few years, Paul says that the three pillars of the Christian church are, in this order, James, and Peter, and John.¹⁶

And when Peter leaves Jerusalem in the 12th chapter of Acts, James the brother of Jesus becomes the pre-eminent Christian leader in Jerusalem.¹⁷ In fact, he is retroactively regarded as the first Bishop of Jerusalem. And there in Jerusalem, James is martyred about 30 years after the crucifixion of his brother.¹⁸

This cluster of dots about James of Jerusalem, James the brother of the Lord in Acts and the Epistles stands in marked contrast to the cluster of dots from the Gospels.

In the Gospels, James is not a believer, or a follower, and may even be in opposition to his brother's ministry.

In the rest of the New Testament, James becomes a hugely important Christian and a pre-eminent Christian leader.

We have no idea as to why this happens, except for that one dot mentioned by Paul last week in 1 Corinthians. After the resurrection, the risen Jesus appears to his brother James. We have no further details about that particular Easter story. But it must have been profoundly influential for James.

¹⁵ Acts 1:14

¹⁶ Gal 2:9

¹⁷ Explicitly clear in Acts 15, Acts 21

¹⁸ Not in scripture, but mentioned by the Jewish historian Josephus in *Antiquities*, 20:9

On the scale of important Christians in the early church, James goes from Zero to Hero, from a non-believer to a great leader. James never expected his brother to rise from death. But Jesus' resurrection changed James' life forever.

That's how powerful and how important the resurrection is in the life of one person some 2,000 years ago.

May you also live in the power of the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.