The reports of Jesus’ empty grave, and his subsequent appearances as one who had been raised physically from the dead, are inclined to seem particularly offensive these days. It is nevertheless the case that it is precisely these two traditions which are presupposed in all four New Testament Gospels as fundamental to faith. Certainly, the records differ concerning the persons who, with Mary Magdalene, discovered the empty tomb on Easter morning; and as is well-known, the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection appearances presuppose a number of different recipients, places and circumstances. It is indisputable, however, that all four gospels unanimously testify that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and buried and rose on the third day from the dead, and that for this reason his mortal body was no longer to be found in his grave on Easter morning.

In the face of this consistent combination of the motifs of ‘bodily resurrection’ and ‘empty grave’, the first question which confronts the exegete is not: How full can the grave be without emptying faith in the resurrection? Nor is it: How can the testimony of the empty grave be assessed and explained plausibly according to historical criteria? His or her first task is to address, on the basis of the texts, a more basic issue: Why is it so important for all the gospel writers to record that the grave of the Risen One was empty? And why didn’t or couldn’t the early Christians combine their faith in the continuous living and working of their crucified Lord with the concept that his dead body had decayed in the grave?

If, in order to answer these questions, we concentrate specifically on the Gospel of Luke among the synoptic gospels, then that is for two crucial reasons. First, Luke’s reports of the resurrection appearances strike us as particularly heavy-handed and, for modern sensibilities, clearly very provocative. Second, Luke contains at the same time some remarkably subtle

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2 Was it Mary Magdalene all by herself (Jn 20) or was she accompanied by other women (Mk 16; Mt 28; Lk 24)? Did Peter also go to the empty grave after the women’s testimony (Lk 24,34)? Was he alone or in company of this one unnamed disciple, who is called in the Gospel of John the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (Jn 20,1ff)?
3 Places of appearance: 1. Jerusalem (Matt 28,9f; Lk 24/Acts 1; Jn 20); 2. Galilee (Mk 16,7 par Mt 28,7.16) [3. Damascus (Gal 1,15-17; cf. Acts 9/22/26)] — a) at the grave (Jn 20,19.26) – b) on the way (Mt 28,9f; Lk
anthropological notions of the continued existence of the dead in the heavenly realm and of physical resurrection, that is, of the relationship between the body and identity.4

In its original version, the Gospel of Mark presumably ended with the commissioning of the women by the angels, and thus contained no extensive account of the appearances of the Risen One to his disciples in Galilee. With Jesus’ earlier promise in Mk 14,28 and the angel’s reminder at the empty grave in 16,7, of course, the oldest gospel leaves its readers in no doubt that the disciples will see the bodily risen Christ there; but the portrayal of the particulars is apparently not considered to be part of the description of the “beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mk 1,1).

If Matthew, on the other hand, offers us additional, detailed accounts of the appearances of the Risen One to the women on their way back from the tomb (Mt 28,9f) and to the eleven disciples on the mountain in Galilee (Mt 28,16-20), his main interest is nevertheless in the theological significance of the so-called “Great Commission”, in which the disciples receive their final teaching on the authority of the Risen One as well as on the goal and content of their own authoritative commissioning. The Risen One overcomes his disciples’ doubts with his word (Mt 28,17f) and settles the open questions with his authoritative instruction. In this way, the conclusion of the gospel becomes for Matthew the hermeneutical key to the whole account of Jesus’ teaching and work which has gone before; and the words of the Risen One serve the church as a criterion for the assessment of controversial traditions.5

The third synoptic gospel also knows of the significance of the teaching of the Risen One. It is nowhere else that the instruction of the resurrection witnesses by Christ himself is described in as much detail as in the two Lukan writings. Whether on the way to Emmaus (Lk 24,25-27,32), in front of the disciples gathered in Jerusalem (Lk 24,44-47), or during the forty days until his ascension (Acts 1,3ff), the Risen One proves himself to be alive by opening the Holy

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5 Those controversial questions, which are supposed to find a ‘final’ clarification for the Matthean church from the conclusion of the gospel, are e.g.: the problem of the legitimacy of christian mission among gentiles and how gentiles are reckoned among the ‘people of God’, the controversial issue of the relationship between Jesus’ instructions and Moses’ Tora, the clarification of the risen Christ’s authority compared to ‘Moses and the prophets’. What can serve the disciples as orientation in their teaching of those whom they ‘make disciples’? What can take the place of circumcision as initiation into the church of Jesus Christ? And what characterizes the life of a christian in similarity and difference to his or her previous life? To this cf. H.-J. Eckstein, Die Weisung Jesu Christi und die Tora des Mose nach dem Matthäusevangelium, in: Jesus Christus als die Mitte der Schrift. Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums, C. Landmesser / H.-J. Eckstein / H. Lichtenberger (Hg.), BZNW 86, Berlin 1997, 379-403.
But why, in order to prove the physical nature of the resurrection, does Luke fall back on such concrete and drastic motifs and traditions, which in the history of research have given rise not only to objection but also to a number of misunderstandings? The Risen One encounters two men, who are discussing the puzzling event of the crucifixion on the road to Emmaus, in human form, and accompanies them on their way. He stops at their place in the evening, and sits down with them at table until they finally recognize him in the giving of thanks and the breaking of the bread as their Lord, and he disappears from their sight again (Lk 24,13-35).

When later Jesus appears in the midst of the gathered disciples, he explicitly urges those who are afraid and full of doubt to look at his hands and feet and literally “grasp” him as bodily risen (ψηλαφήσας με 24,39). When because of joy they are unable to believe what they have seen and are amazed, he has his disciples give him a piece of fried fish and eats it in front of their eyes (Lk 24,41-43: ... καὶ λαβὼν ἐνόπτων αὐτῶν ἐφαγεν). Doesn’t all this amount to a materialistic misinterpretation of the eschatological reality of the resurrection – as if the Risen One had been raised back into his old physical nature? Doesn’t Luke presuppose by this that the one who was raised from the dead remains tied to space, time, and matter and dependent on drink and food like all mortals?

The answer is given by Luke himself in the course of his description. The gentile Christian evangelist knows of his Hellenistic readers’ dichotomous image of man according to which human beings consist of a mortal, transient body and an eternal spirit (πνεῦμα) or immortal soul (ψυχή). Given this philosophical presupposition, the unique mystery of the eschatological resurrection of the Crucified One on the third day, for which there is simply no analogy, cannot be made sufficiently clear by the mere mention of appearances in front of the disciples alone. Could they not just as easily be interpreted as the appearances of the spirit of someone who was violently put to death and now wanders around restlessly? The disciples themselves – according to Luke’s account – react to the appearance of Jesus at first with shock and fear and believe they are seeing a spirit ( ἑωυκοῦν πνεῦμα θεωρεῖν Lk 24,37).

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6 Many later manuscripts (which follow the Koine-text) add to 24,42, “and from a honey comb” (καὶ ἀπὸ μελισσίου κηρίου), which may have to do with the use of honey in the celebration of the Eucharist, a tradition which finds evidence in the old church.
Both the invitation to “grasp” the resurrection body and especially the demonstrative eating of the fish in front of the resurrection witnesses serve to counter the misinterpretation of the appearance of the Lord as that of a “ghost”. This is because according to ancient understanding, a ghost cannot eat nor drink, and it does not have a material body which can be touched. For this reason Jesus, according to Lk 24,39, explicitly urges his disciples: “Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have”.

It is evident that in a Hellenistic environment, the emphasis on the empty grave and the demonstration of the physical nature of Jesus’ resurrection is intended to resist the likely misunderstanding that Jesus’ body (τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ 23,55; 24,3.23) might have remained in the grave and therefore in death, whilst only his spirit (πνεῦμα Lk 23,46) or soul (ψυχή Acts 2,27 / Ps 16 [15],10) had appeared several times and ultimately ascended to God. On the other hand, Luke in no way presupposes that Jesus had returned to his previous, earthly life and to his old physical nature, as he can report of the widow’s son in Nain (Lk 7,11ff) and Jairus’ daughter (Lk 8,40ff), of Tabitha (Acts 9,36ff), and Euthychus (Acts 20,7ff). On the contrary, the Risen One in his new identity can apparently take on human form and allow himself to be recognized, without being principally or always recognizable to the human eye as such; he is able to appear perceptibly in space and time, but also to withdraw in order to ascend physically to his Father into the heavenly realm in front of the witnesses’ eyes, and by this be hidden from their sight for the last time (Lk 24,50-53; Acts 1,6-11; cf. v. 9: βλέπωντων αὐτῶν ἔπηρθη καὶ νεφέλη ὑπέλαβεν αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν οὐρανῶν αὐτῶν).

As far as this is concerned, Luke advocates a very subtle concept of “body and identity”. To the disciples, the Risen One shows the scars on his hands and feet so that they recognize him as their crucified Lord: “Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself” — ... ὁτί ἐγώ εἰμι αὐτός (24,39). And the disciples on the road to Emmaus identify Jesus at the particular moment when he, as so often before, breaks the bread in front of their eyes with a blessing and hands it to them (Lk 24,30f). The identification of the person takes place through the demonstration of continuity! At the same time, however, the reality of the resurrection is described by Luke in a pointed contrast to the old physical nature: the Risen One no longer

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8 Concerning Jairus’ daughter, Luke expressly talks about the return of the deceased’s pneuma: καὶ ἐπέστρεψεν τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτῆς καὶ ἀνέστη παραχρῆμα (Lk 8,55). And, according to Acts 20,10, Paul states that the soul had not left dead Eutychus for good (μὴ δοξασθήσετε, ἢ γὰρ ψυχὴ αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἐστιν). Cf. the raising of Lazarus Jn 11,1ff and already in Old Testament traditions 1 Kgs 17,17ff; 2 Kgs 4,31ff; 13,20ff. The account in Mt 27,52f that many saints were rising from their graves in the context of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, is more difficult to assess (καὶ τὰ μνημεῖα ἀνέστησαν καὶ πολλὰ σώματα τῶν κεκομιμένων ἄγιων ἄξιαν). Does Matthew think of an anticipation of the eschatological, bodily resurrection of some individuals who then “appear” in analogy to their Lord in front of many in Jerusalem (καὶ ἐνεφανίσθησαν πολλοῖς)?
suffers, he is not mortal, and is not subject to transience; he is not restricted to space and time, and he is not rooted in this world, rather he is depicted as living in the heavenly world. The new reality of this resurrection implies such a fundamental transformation that the disciples do not recognize their Lord after the resurrection as the one they have known; instead, they identify him first of all and for the first time as the Risen One. Therefore the identity of the risen Lord cannot be grasped without recognizing the discontinuity of his physical existence. And on the other hand, the reality of the Risen One cannot be understood detached from the identity of the Crucified and without the continuity of his life for God and his disciples.

In Jesus’ invitation in Lk 24,39: “See .. that it is I myself!” – ἰδεῖτε ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι αὐτῷ, insight into this complex identity of the Risen One is in no way presupposed as natural, but is instead first disclosed to the human being and spoken to him or her in such a way that it leads to insight. Thus Luke also testifies of the Emmaus disciples in Lk 24,31f that their eyes first have to be opened by the Risen One so that they can recognize him as such (αὐτῶν δὲ ἄνοιχτησαν οἱ ὀφθαλμοί καὶ ἔπενευσαν αὐτῶν). – “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (24,32)

Now, if Luke takes the dichotomous image of man prevalent in his environment into consideration on the one hand, but deviates from all non-Jewish-Hellenistic concepts by labelling the resurrection reality of Jesus as ‘physical’ on the other, this raises the question of the detailed realization of his concept of ‘spirit and body’ and of his idea of the ‘bodily’ resurrection of Jesus. As it turns out, it is clear from the Gospel as well as from Acts that Luke develops his christological and anthropological convictions in a thoroughly consistent and firm manner. Taking up the anthropological dichotomy with its Hellenistic distinction of ‘body’ (σῶμα) and ‘spirit’ (πνεῦμα), Luke tells us that Jesus on the cross hands his pneuma over to his Father while his mortal body dies. In allusion to Ps 31 (30),5, the dying Jesus cries out in a loud voice: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last (literally, “he breathed out his spirit”) – πάτερ, εἰς χείράς σου παρατίθεμαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου. τούτο δὲ εἶπὼν ἔξεπνευσεν (Lk 23,46). Only the dead man’s ‘body’ (σῶμα) is then buried, so that the women at the funeral can see how the soma of Jesus is laid in the tomb on the evening of the day of his death – Lk 23,55: ἔθεσαντο τὸ μνημεῖον καὶ ὡς ἔτεθη τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ.

Qua pneuma (πνεῦμα), with his ‘spirit’, Jesus enters into the heavenly paradise immediately after his death – “today” (σήμερον). As he has entrusted his spirit to his heavenly Father, he does not loose his communion with God even in death, but instead, qua pneuma, reaches the heavenly sphere on the same day on which he died. Only so can it be explained with logical
consistency how, according to Luke, Jesus can promise one of the two criminals being crucified with him: "Today you will be with me in Paradise" – ἀμὴν σοι λέγω, σήμερον μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ (Lk 23,43). This man, in recognition of his own guilt, had just asked him urgently: “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom” (23,42). So all of this happens according to Luke’s account on the day of death and not later at the moment of bodily resurrection. Even for Jesus this happens on Good Friday – and not later on Easter Sunday!9

The ascension of the pneuma into the heavenly paradise after leaving the earthly soma is also presupposed in Luke’s parable of Abraham and Lazarus, since the poor man is seen after his demise in paradisiacal table-communion with his progenitor Abraham (Lk 16,23). He is immediately taken by angels into “Abraham’s bosom”, i.e. into the heavenly table-communion with Abraham (ἐγένετο δὲ καὶ ἀπενεχθήμενα αὐτῶν ὑπὸ τῶν ἁγγέλων eἰς τὸν κόλπον Ἀβραάμ Lk 16,22). Of Stephen, Luke can say in Acts 7,59 that he also calls upon Jesus at his execution, just as the latter had called to his heavenly Father, and dying asks him to receive his pneuma: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” – κύριε Ἰησοῦ, δέξαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου.

Now for Luke, even with all this the mystery of Jesus’ resurrection on Easter morning has by no means yet been adequately portrayed. For the testimony to the resurrection not only concerns the heavenly reception of the person qua pneuma, but rather the transformation of his soma and the reconciliation and redemption of his past ‘physical’ existence. On the third day after his crucifixion, God already did to Jesus what the Old Testamental-Jewish – and there specifically apocalyptic – tradition hopes for and expects on the day of God’s coming.10

But while ‘the righteous’ must await the eschatological uniting of spirit and – resurrected and transformed – body, the body of Jesus – as the one truly ‘righteous’ (Lk 23,47) – has already been raised into the eschatological reality out of the grave on the third day. This is why the angels can reproach the women who on Easter morning search in vain for ‘the soma of the Lord Jesus’ in the empty grave (οὐχ εὗρον τὸ σῶμα τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Lk 24,3; cf. 24,34): “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (τί ζητεῖτε τῶν ζῶντων μετὰ τῶν νεκρῶν) – “He is not here, but has risen” (οὐκ ἔστιν ὃδε, ἀλλὰ ἡγέρθη), Lk 24,5f.

That Jesus could in no way be held by the realm of the dead, but instead was to be redeemed from the pain of death in a comprehensive sense by God through the resurrection, is something that Luke finds already predicted in a prophecy of David in Psalm 16 (15),10 (Acts

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9 Thus Luke himself obviously would scarcely assume that Jesus had spent the three days between his cross and his bodily resurrection altogether in “hades”, in the underworld. In contrast see the apocryphical Gospel of Peter 41f (“Did you preach to those who are fallen asleep?”); cf. 1 Pet 3,19; 4,6; less obvious Eph 4,8f.

2,22-32); and with this he himself gives an example for the teaching about Jesus’ resurrection from Scripture, which is mentioned occasionally. In the christological part of Peter’s programmatic “sermon on Pentecost,” David’s psalm of trust is interpreted as a prophetic announcement of the bodily resurrection of Jesus (προδόσων ἐλάλησεν περὶ τῆς ἀναστάσεως τοῦ Χριστοῦ Acts 2,31) – even before the decay of his body! God neither wanted to leave Jesus’ soul to Hades (οὐκ ἐγκαταλείψεις τὴν ψυχήν μου εἰς θόν ... Acts 2,27 / Ps 16 [15],10) nor was even the transient flesh of Jesus ever to see decay (οὐτε ἐγκαταλείφη εἰς θόν οὐτε ἡ σάρξ αὐτοῦ εἶδεν διαφθοράν Acts 2,31). The exuberant joy of the one praying in Ps 16,9 is grounded in the fact that “his flesh will also live in hope” (ἐτὶ δὲ καὶ ἡ σάρξ μου κατασκηνώσει ἐπ’ ἐλπίδι Acts 2,26).

Now Luke is not only concerned about the formal indication that Jesus’ crucifixion and his resurrection from the grave have already been foreseen by Scripture – in the sense of Lk 24,46: “Thus it is written that the Christ is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day.” The reference to the event’s being in accordance with Scripture implies at the same time that it does not have to be interpreted as contingent or absurd. By proving itself to correspond to the providence and will of God, it can be recognized as meaningful and indispensable: “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” – οὐχὶ ταῦτα ἔδει παθεῖν τὸν χριστὸν καὶ εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ; (Lk 24,26; vgl. 9,22; Acts 17,3). Thus in our context the question arises inevitably again, what Luke – following his traditions and in his own theological assessment – saw to be the meaning and the necessity of the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Alongside a large number of other christological and soteriological issues, Luke focuses on one thing which he describes variously by means of his so-called “scheme of contrast”11: Men rejected and killed Jesus of Nazareth, “the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3,14), in whom God himself acted (Acts 2,22). But God confirmed and vindicated him by raising him from the dead and by proving him before the world to be “Kyrios and Christ” (Acts 2,36), “Leader and Saviour” (Acts 5,31). By this, God not only rehabilitated him formally, but showed him effectively to be the “Author of life” (τὸν δὲ ἀρχηγὸν τῆς ζωῆς Acts 3,15) and redeemed him completely from the pain of death (διὸ ὁ θεὸς ἀνέστησεν λύσας τὰς ὀδονιας τοῦ θανάτου Acts 2,24) so that he can no longer die or decay (μηκέτι μέλλοντα ὑποστρέφειν εἰς διαφθοράν Acts 13,34).12

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10 In the history of reception, as Old Testament references for an eschatological resurrection brought about by God could be understood: 1 Sam 2,6; Job 19,26f; Is 25,8; 26,19; Ez 37,1-14; Dan 12,2.13; Hos 6,2; 13,14.
11 To this scheme of contrast cf. Acts 2,23f; 3,15; 4,10; 5,30; 10,39f; 13,28-30.
12 Accordingly, the “children of the resurrection” will be like the angels in “that they cannot die anymore” – οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀποθανεῖν ἔτι δύνανται, ἰδανγελοι γὰρ εἰσίν καὶ υἱοὶ εἰσὶν θεοῦ τῆς ἀναστάσεως υἱοὶ δύτες Lk 20,36.
But if God has “exalted” Jesus Christ into his presence and glory – far beyond mere rehabilitation and compensation – (Lk 24,26; Acts 2,33; 5,31; cf. 1,6-11), then new life cannot be second to the old one in its fullness and complexity, but can only exceed it. And if the “physical” existence of the earthly Jesus is not characterized negatively, but is in the context of the Old Testamental-Jewish theology of creation connoted altogether positively, then for Luke as well as for the other New Testament witnesses it goes without saying that God at Jesus’ redemption does not leave the soma, the mortal body, to the reign of death but transforms him physically. If this is true for the “Author of life”, the ἀρχηγός τῆς ζωῆς (Acts 3,15), then for those who follow him and seek their salvation in his name it cannot be described otherwise. The reality of the comprehensive resurrection of Jesus assures those who believe in him concerning their own hope of resurrection; and the physical nature of Jesus’ resurrection from the grave contradicts all reductionist misunderstandings of continuation after death. For Christ was not intended to rise from the dead as the only one, but rather as the first (εἰ πρῶτος ἐξ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν Acts 26,23).

Greeks in Athens may ridicule the thought of bodily resurrection (Acts 17,18.22-32) and even Jewish circles like the Sadducees may contradict the hope of resurrection (Lk 20,27ff; Acts 4,1f; 23,6ff); but for Luke, this conviction cannot be given up: after dying God does not restrict the paradisiacal communion of those who surrender to him to living qua pneuma or qua psyche, but they – like Christ before them – will rise finally and comprehensively, that is “physically” or “bodily”. Then, as the resurrected, they will live in reconciled continuity with their complex bodily existence and in liberating discontinuity with their vulnerable and transient body, that is: they will live in fullness.

Admittedly, Luke is not so interested in the question, how full Jesus’ grave can be without emptying faith in the resurrection. But with an abundance of sophisticated and consistent arguments he answers the question of why, for him – just as for the other Gospel writers – it is so important that Jesus’ grave was empty.

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13 On the resurrection of the dead according to Luke see Lk 14,14; 20,27-39; Acts 4,2; 10,42; 17,18.31; 23,6; 24,14f.25; on eternal life Lk 10,25.28; 18,30; 20,38b (θεὸς δὲ οὐκ ἐστὶν νεκρῶν ἀλλὰ ζωτικῶν, πάντες γὰρ αὐτῷ ζῶσιν); Acts 13,46.48; cf. 5,20; 11,18.