John 20 is perhaps one of the most enigmatic chapters of the whole gospel, which in turn is not a text as a whole renowned for being free from enigma! It has a number of “open spaces,” as we shall see, where one can fill the “gaps” in the individual stories in different ways with resulting different interpretations of the pericopes where they occur, as well as of the overall story of the gospel as a whole.¹

The very existence of the chapter in the gospel can be seen as somewhat strange and perhaps unexpected. There is no direct evidence that the chapter is not to be taken as an integral part of the gospel.² Nevertheless, the chapter has been seen as somewhat anomalous in some ways within the gospel, and its presence may provide something of an “anticlimax.” For so much of what precedes in the gospel has pointed forward to the cross as the climax of the narrative, in both literary and “theological” terms. A primary theme of the gospel is the revelation which Jesus brings of his own and/or the Father’s “glory.” But the moment of glorification is identified in so much of John’s gospel with the cross. The glorification of Jesus is

¹ The chapter as a whole, and the individual pericopes in it, have been analysed countless times in the history of scholarship. The footnotes here make no pretence of being comprehensive in their coverage. Further, a number of the views espoused here make no claims to originality. The essay is offered here, with some hesitation, to someone who is a far greater Johannine scholar than I can ever claim to be, but who has also been a great colleague and friend over many years; he has in the past quietly corrected my strange views, invariably with a gentle smile: the present essay may provoke a similar reaction!

² Hence unlike e.g. the story in 7:53–8:11, where there is strong manuscript evidence that the pericope is a later addition to the rest of the gospel and not part of the “original” text; also ch. 21, where there is no manuscript evidence for a text of John lacking the chapter, but where a number of linguistic features (in the vocabulary used), as well as the fact that 20:30–31 reads very much as if it is the ending of a whole text (and hence the re-start of the narrative at 21:1 seems rather strange in “literary” terms), suggest that ch. 21 is an “appendix” to the gospel added secondarily by a later editor/redactor. For discussion, see the commentaries at the various points, e.g. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 700–706; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John XIII-XXI* (AB 29A; New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1077–1082; C. Kingsley Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John* (2nd edn; London: SPCK, 1977), 479–80; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1977), 618; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to St John* (London: Continuum, 2005), 508–9.
his “exaltation,” and the “lifting up” of Jesus in glory is identified with his being “lifted up” physically in the punishment of crucifixion. This is made explicit in 12:32–33: Jesus talks in v. 32 about his being “lifted up,” language that has been used earlier in the narrative but unexplained (cf. 3:14; 8:28); but this is now immediately clarified in v. 33 by the narrator explaining that this was “to indicate what kind of a death he was to die.” Jesus’ glorification is thus identified with the cross. So when the Johannine Jesus cries out in 19:30 “it is finished” (τετέλεσται), it is almost universally agreed that this is a cry of victory and completion: the work which Jesus has come to earth to accomplish is now completed. The work of revealing the true nature of God, of revealing his own true nature, and of revealing that nature as one of love that leads right up to the point of laying down one’s life for others in the act of supreme love, is now completed—in the death of Jesus on the cross.

All this then raises the question of what significance, in terms of the “literary” structure of the story as well as the underlying “theology,” ch. 20 might have. Is not everything already said and the (theological) story line already complete with the great cry of affirmation in 19:30 and the death of Jesus on the cross? What else is, or indeed can be, added by the presence of ch. 20? Is this chapter just a sop to the tradition (which included stories of the empty tomb and/or resurrection appearances)? At the very least, it would seem that the resurrection appearance (or non-appearance) stories which occur in ch. 20 are not meant to provide the theological climax of the gospel’s story. They are not then meant to provide the triumphant conclusion to the story and the “proof” that the theological claims made earlier are indeed valid and true. In fact they seem rather to provide a corrective to such a view, as we shall see.


4 See e.g. Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament. Volume Two (London: SCM, 1955), 56; Jesus’ resurrection “cannot be an event of special significance”; the appearances, like the miracles earlier in the narrative, “are not indispensable; in fact there ought to be no need of them, but they were granted as a concession to man’s weakness”; also his Gospel of