

Easter Day 2017

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John 20:1-9

The resurrection is in the news. News is in vogue. Or rather, the word “news” is in vogue, having become so because people have made such capital out of denying that news is actually news, calling it fake. The resurrection of Jesus has been the subject of the same allegations, of course. A few decades after it took place, people were claiming it was fake. We are here because it was not, but since it took place two thousand years ago, there is a sense in which it isn’t really news. Many things are not actually news, in that there isn’t very much which is new about them. It doesn’t follow from that, of course, that they are invented or fake, but then reason and argument are not exactly the highest of priorities among those whose political careers depend upon defiance of the facts. But news is a good context in which to discuss the resurrection, because although it is an event in history, it is also far more than that, and thinking of it as old news is not thinking about it at all.

The specific news item I have in mind is a survey published last week, considering whether or not the people of Britain believed in the resurrection of Jesus. Much to the media's chagrin, many more people said they believe in the resurrection than can be statistically numerated as active churchgoing Christians. This suggests that the residual Christian faith of this country is rather stronger than some would like to admit. And, lest we be complacent, it suggests also that the churches are not drawing in enough of those who believe. But one of the key questions concerned the nature of this resurrection belief. Did those who replied in the affirmative believe that "the resurrection of Jesus from the dead happened word-for-word as described in the Bible"?

Awkward. You see, the resurrection of Jesus is not actually described in the Bible. Nowhere are we given an account of Christ's rising. Instead, we are given accounts of what happened afterwards. We are told about those who discovered the empty tomb, we are told about those who saw and touched the risen Jesus, but we are not told about how we got from the before

of death to the after of life. And the reason we are not told that is quite simply that the people who wrote the gospels accepted that they did not, and could not know. They knew that Christ was alive, and they knew that this was an event best thought of as nothing less than a new creation, as the remaking of everything there was, as far beyond their comprehension as the infinite exceeds the finite.

The four gospels tell the story of the first Easter in similar but nevertheless crucially different ways. All agree that Mary Magdalen found an empty tomb, but the four gospels build on that basic history different accounts of resurrection faith. We heard this morning the fourth gospel, the one we call John, and this version might have been written to contradict the simplistic questions in of the opinion pollster.

Mary comes to the tomb early, and finds the stone rolled away. Her reaction is one of panic – someone has stolen the body. And so she runs to the male disciples to tell them what has happened. Two of them race to the tomb. Simon Peter, the chief of the band, and the anonymous

beloved disciple, traditionally thought to be John the son of Zebedee. They set off together but the beloved disciple gets there first, looks into the tomb, but does not go in. Peter arrives, and as is his right as the leader, enters the tomb first. He sees the linen cloths which had enclosed the body lying there, and the smaller cloth which had been wrapped round Jesus' head rolled up and lying by itself. Then the other disciple, who had got there first, enters the tomb. And we are told that he saw and believed.

What is going on here? The answer is, a journey. The journey of the beloved disciple to the tomb is an image of his journey of faith. He sprints ahead in bewilderment and confusion, he arrives at the tomb and looks inside from a distance, but he does not enter. Only when he goes into the tomb are we told that he saw and believed. And what did he see? In part, the answer is nothing. He saw nothing because there was nothing to see, the body which had been laid in the tomb was no longer there. He sees not what he expects, but the absence, the emptiness which confounds all his expectation.

But there are small things he does actually see. The linen cloths and the napkins are lying there, the latter neatly folded. There is a deliberate contrast being made with the raising of Lazarus, who came forth from the tomb wrapped in his grave clothes. He came back to the life he had before, he was, if you like, resuscitated. The resurrection of Jesus is altogether different. This is not a mummified corpse which needs to be freed from his bandages. The grave clothes are irrelevant, the stuff of death has no part to play in the world of eternal life.

In particular, the napkin which is lying neatly folded is described by what we call a “theological passive”, a use of a verb which does not tell of the agent who has performed the action. It has been folded up, not “someone has folded it up”. This device is common in scripture to challenge the reader with the question “who”? If it has been folded up, who has done the folding? Who has done the raising, who brings life where there is death? God, the creator, the author of all life.

The disciple who remains on the outside of the tomb does not see the work of God. Entering into

the midst of the place of death and burial, he finds nothing other than the hand of the creator. He sees, and he believes. Placing himself within the lowest point of Jesus' life, he is given the gift of faith. And it is a faith which will be assured and expanded by scripture – “as yet they did not know the scripture that he must rise from the dead”. It is not a faith which begins with the so called scriptural evidence, it is a faith which begins with Christ and the reality of his death and resurrection. It is that faith which will then read and understand the scriptures anew.

The point of all this is almost too obvious to labour. Resurrection faith is not the explanatory hypothesis of a very difficult puzzle, as if Sherlock Holmes is present to explain away all our confusion. Resurrection faith is the encounter with the risen Christ which embraces the source of all life, the something from nothing which is the gift of God to us in Jesus in every moment of our lives. The resurrection is not limited to a distant past in which we are unable to share, the resurrection is the truth of the Christian life, in the miracle of the eucharist, in the mystery of baptism, in the power of love, in the kindness of

others, in the thrill of the new, in the truth of the beautiful, in the joy of all of our lives.

Christ has been raised from the dead, Christ has burst the bonds of the tomb, Christ can be found no longer in the darkness and cold of the tomb; because Christ is risen, here and now, today and always, in the church, in the world, and in everything there is. Christ is risen, and love is alive, and we shout Alleluia.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!