

The language of resurrection

(sermon preached at Littlemore on 15th April 2007 by John Muddiman)

The Easter Greeting with which we began this service is Alleluia Christ is risen; to which we are expected to respond "He is risen indeed. Alleluia" My sermon is about the little word "indeed". Are we just trying to convince ourselves, or is it really true? Put it another way, is it reasonable and honest to believe that the last and greatest prophet of Israel rose from the dead 36 hours after he was crucified?

The question of truth in any historical matter turns on the question of evidence, and for the claim that Jesus rose from the dead we have two sorts of evidence: the first is hard but ambiguous; the second unambiguous but soft. The first is the empty tomb. Hard evidence, because objectively verifiable: either the tomb was empty or it was not, but ambiguous because several other explanations of its emptiness are possible apart from the believer's explanation. The second is the series of resurrection appearances in the Gospels: this is soft evidence because they are inevitably filtered through the minds and hearts of the witnesses, but unambiguous because in each case they were a life transforming experience.

I will say a little more about the empty tomb before turning to the appearances.

The empty tomb story is found in all four Gospels and each includes at least two pieces of information which are difficult, if not impossible, to explain except on the assumption that there are true: the tomb in which Jesus was laid belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy member of the Jewish Sanhedrin who evidently did not agree with the sentence of the court. And it was discovered empty by one person among others, Mary of Magdala, about whom we would know nothing at all, if she did not do this. I suggest it is less reasonable to dismiss these two persons as fictional inventions than it is to accept the fact of their historicity.

Honesty demands that we admit that there are confusing discrepancies between the accounts on almost all other points of detail, yet the core remains solid: Joseph supplied the tomb and Mary found it empty. But, of course, this first kind of evidence is ambiguous. A natural immediate reaction to it would be to say what Mary says in this morning's gospel (John 20.11-18) "They have taken my Lord away and I do not know where they have laid him."

Before I try to ask the question of truth in regard to the appearances I need to ask another question: what does it mean to speak of "rising from the dead"? What sort of notion is involved? For us now Resurrection is a technical Christian term, but when the gospels were written it wasn't. In the New Testament there are two words translated resurrection which have ordinary normal meanings of "waking up" and "getting up". They are used almost synonyms because when ordinary folk in first century Palestine woke up they had to get up and roll the beds away to make a living room. There was no chance of a nice lie-in! These words for resurrection then only take on a technical sense when you add the phrase "from the dead".

Waking up and getting out of bed was thus compared metaphorically to the overcoming of death at the end of time. It was an attempt to describe in language drawn from every day existence something indescribable, the future of God's new creation. It isn't quite accurate to say that being raised from sleep was thought of as purely literal and being raised from death as purely metaphorical, for there was felt to be a real analogy between the two. People in the first century were puzzled by the phenomenon of sleep just as they were puzzled and appalled by the all too familiar phenomenon of death. Sleep was seen as a kind of half-way state between living and dying, and since one is regularly woken from the first, one might hope eventually to be woken from the second.

The language of resurrection from the dead is therefore metaphorical, but it is a metaphor that refers to a reality, a real external hope. Ultimately it is a question of who is the greater: the God of Israel who created the world, or the last great enemy Death. So we are not dealing here with a crude notion of resuscitation, but with a mystery of divine transformation of the stuff of this world into the material of the next. Most first century Jewish visions of the resurrection of the dead imagine it in apocalyptic terms: the shaking of the heavens and the earth, the cry of the Archangel and the blast of the trumpet – loud enough to wake the dead. And this background affects the way some early Christians experienced the risen Christ.

This first kind of appearance is well represented by the reading we heard from the Apocalypse of John (Revelation 1.4-11). The Risen Christ appears like the Son of Man in Daniel, in a long robe with a golden belt, with hair as white as wool, with eyes like flaming fire and a voice like a thundering waterfall, and with a sharp two edged sword, the word of judgement, proceeding out of his mouth. And the Seer falls at his feet like a dead man.

St Paul seems to have had the same kind of visionary experience with a blinding light and the glory of God reflected in the face of the crucified Christ, an encounter that turned him from a persecutor to a preacher of the gospel. And Matthew ends his book with Christ enthroned with all authority in heaven and on earth, sending his disciples out to baptize all the nations.

But the passage from St John's Gospel that we heard this morning gives us a different sort of resurrection appearance, quieter, more domestic, more like waking from sleep in the early morning. Mary at the tomb, crying because the body has disappeared, not seeing straight because of her tears, thinking she was talking to the gardener and only recognising Jesus when he calls her name in a familiar tone. There are similar stories like this in the gospels of Luke and John, in which Jesus accompanies disciples on the road or appears in a locked upper room or by the lakeside in the early morning mist and says to them "Peace be with you" and is vividly and tangibly present with the marks of his suffering still there.

The evidence of these different sorts of appearances is soft: it is variable and subjective. But does the subjectivity of these encounters invalidate them as evidence from the

historical point of view? No, for in every case a verifiable change is the result – a change from fear and doubt to courage and hope. So, do the preconceptions about the nature of resurrection, which necessarily affect what was experienced by the first Christians mean that those experiences are not true, that is were not genuinely God-given visions? Not at all. God’s grace always works with our nature and mental capacities and not against them. So can a moderately intelligent and reasonably honest believer respond to the Easter Greeting: “Christ is risen” with “He is risen indeed!”? Yes. That is reasonable: it is not contrary to the evidence. Indeed it is rather more plausible to believe this, than to believe the alternatives: that the disciples perpetrated a deliberate fraud, or were indulging in wishful thinking.

So much for the history.

But when we make our response to the Easter greeting, we are not just making a statement about the past, based on an honest and reasonable assessment of the available evidence. We are even more importantly making a statement about the present and the future. Easter is so central to Christian faith and life, because this pattern of death and resurrection corresponds to our own present experience. We are selfish and sinful people, we waste our opportunities and tolerate horrible injustices, but we also know, here every week in this Eucharist, the love and forgiveness of God. We reproduce the pattern by dying to sin and coming alive to righteousness. Easter is with us today.

It also also points us towards the future. What is life, but a long and accelerating journey towards the inevitability of death? And yet we believe that our loving Creator is ready to gather up the fragments of our personal lives, purify them, and recreate them for eternal life. That is, in my opinion, a more reasonable view of the purpose of our existence, that we are being drawn into God’s future, than the alternative atheistic denial of ultimate meaning. And this makes Easter absolutely central.

In his lovely sermon on Good Friday Simon Thorn quoted George Herbert’s poem on the Sacrifice of Christ. Following his example, I would like to end by quoting another poem of his on the subject of Easter. George Herbert was Vicar of a parish near Salisbury and wrote his poems in the three years before he died at the age of 40 in 1633. It well expresses the present impact and future hope of Easter faith.

Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
Without delays,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him mayst rise:
That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
His life may make thee gold, and much more, just.

The allusion in the last two lines is the myth of the philosopher’s stone, on which ancient alchemy was based, that there existed a substance which when calcined, reduced to dust

by extreme heat would turn base metal into gold, and if diluted and drunk would become the elixir of immortality. Herbert refers to it in the hymn we have just sung, Teach me my God and King, he entitled it the Elixir, and the last verse reads: "This is the famous stone that turneth all to gold, for that which God doth touch and own cannot for less be told".

So Easter faith takes the base metal of our ordinary lives and makes it gold, and even more than gold, just, that justified and forgiven and sanctified, beginning to be turned into saints.

Amen