

## Looking at the risen Christ (John 20.19-31)

In these weeks after Easter, our gospel readings are some of Jesus's resurrection appearances, and it's almost impossible these days not to get into a discussion about whether there really was a physical resurrection. It's a very modern obsession – a hundred years ago nobody preached about it, but today it's become a kind of test-case for the meaning of Christianity as a whole.

So it's worth saying that the gospel writers themselves don't know what happened at the resurrection, and the appearance stories are not told to prove that Jesus was physically there. Even the story in Luke about Jesus eating the broiled fish, is told to show that Jesus was *not a ghost* – but what he was, it doesn't dare say. In other stories, Jesus appears in locked rooms and disappears into thin air, he's mistaken for someone else, refuses to be touched, and finally ascends into heaven – none of which is what you expect of a physical person.

In this morning's gospel from St. John, the disciples are in hiding in a locked room. Suddenly, "Jesus came and stood among them." One of the disciples, Thomas, isn't there, and when he hears about it, he's sceptical. So a week later, Jesus appears again. He tells Thomas to touch his wounds, but instead Thomas says simply, "My Lord and my God." And Jesus replies, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blest are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Evidently the disciples shouldn't need to see Jesus, let alone touch him, to believe in the resurrection. And that is really not surprising. If we believe that Christ and God are one, the last thing we should expect is physical proof. God doesn't deal in physical proofs. People have been surprised by burning bushes, entertained angels unawares, seen and heard the strangest things, but as St. John himself says, no-one has ever seen God. And no-one has ever needed to see God to believe in God, or feel God's presence, or to understand what God wanted them to do.

So I think that to worry about whether or not the resurrection was physical is a waste of time: we don't know; the evangelists didn't know, and it distracts us from thinking about what the resurrection means, which is much more important.

And I think we should also separate the resurrection itself from the resurrection appearances. The resurrection is the overcoming of evil by good and death by life. But as Jesus says, on Easter Day the disciples shouldn't need appearances to understand that it has happened. So why do they get them?

Well, I think, they are partly a bit of help for the disciples, because on Good Friday, the disciple had collapsed. They went into hiding, not knowing if they were about to be arrested, probably hating themselves and blaming each other for deserting Jesus. They seem to have forgotten everything he taught them. They're not showing any confidence in God, and they're certainly not about to go out and carry on Jesus's work. Then they have this experience which changes everything. They see Jesus again, they hear him say again the things he taught. And then they finally understand that who Jesus was, and what he meant, were not destroyed by his death. They shouldn't have needed that reassurance, really, but they did, and God is good.

The appearances are more than a reassurance, though, and they say more than that “Jesus is back.” The appearances are as much about the absence of Jesus as his presence – they are about the fact that Jesus is no longer physically there, and what that means for the rest of us.

The gospels explore this through three different kinds of resurrection story. The first is the empty tomb itself. The tomb says, Jesus is gone. It is a terrible moment, but it is also the crucial moment for the faith of the disciples. Will the tomb swallow up everything they believe about the Christ? Or will they realize that faith doesn't depend on what happens in this world? They have watched the faith of Jesus make a nothing even of evil and death. Now the empty tomb challenges them to have the same faith – absolute faith – faith that trusts in God no matter what happens.

The second kind of resurrection story is the one where people see Jesus but don't recognize him, like Mary Magdalen at the tomb or the disciples on the road to Emmaeus. These stories pose a different kind of challenge. Jesus seems to be asking, Do you know me? Or am I the gardener, the casual companion, the stranger? I am. Didn't I tell you that what you do for them, you do for me? Didn't I say that we are all the children of God? I am everywhere and everyone. But if you forget it, if your faith dozes, you'll miss me... These stories are a challenge to keep awake, and remember that the risen Christ is everywhere around us and we meet him all the time.

The third kind of story is the one where the disciples see Jesus himself, like today's. There's a heartrending quality to these stories. Jesus is here – but only for a moment. The disciples won't be able to produce him to prove that he is alive, nor bring potential converts to meet him. In these stories Jesus seems to say, how will the Kingdom come, now I am gone? Will you sit about and mope? Or are you going to get up and take on God's work? You've had me to rely on: now you need to rely on your faith. You've had me to follow: now you need to lead. The Kingdom hasn't come on earth yet, and it never will unless you do as I command. And no longer like a flock of sheep after a shepherd, but as brothers and sisters and fellow soldiers. You are my body now.

This is the greatest challenge of the resurrection. Not only to go on having faith in God and in Christ, not only to be awake to Christ in everyone we meet, but to understand that we *are* Christ – because everything Christ was, for God and for the world, it is up to us to be now. It sounds shocking – because the hardest thing for the disciples and for us to understand, is that what was special about Jesus was not himself, but his relationship with God, and every one of us is called to be in the same relationship. Jesus had tried to explain it. "I am in the father and the father is in me," (14.11) he said. And, "I am the vine and you are the branches." (15.5) "Go and bear fruit." (15.16) "Love one another as I have loved you."

The disciples had always said, "Yes, yes," to the teaching, but it was Jesus the man who was really their hero, and when he was killed they didn't know what to do. Until this moment, when they hear Jesus say once more, "As my father sent me, so I send you." "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." And now at last they understand that the Spirit of God that was in Christ Jesus is in them. And that the world needs them to take up the cross and work for the Kingdom and to be to the world what Jesus was.

The disciples rose to the challenge. But the readers of John's gospel were born too late to see the risen Christ and have their doubts transformed into glorious confidence. So are we, and there are times when most of us think, how nice it would be, just once, to be sure, to see Jesus ourselves. I'm not sure it would really help. Visions don't prove anything. No-one has ever seen God. But John's Jesus has a great consolation for us: "Blest are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Blest. That's us!

The proof of the resurrection is us. We are the real physical resurrection. And if that seems a heavy responsibility, we can remember that Jesus never said we should bear it alone. His commission is to all the disciples, together. His commandment is, to love one another. Nor do we need to worry too much about spotting the resurrection or the Holy Spirit in ourselves. Look for it in the person next door, and let them find it in you. At the moment when we can all see the goodness and the godliness in one another, then we are looking at the risen Christ.

Amen

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