

"We believe in the Resurrection of the dead"

Easter 2017

Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity

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I have been thinking a lot about the resurrection of the dead lately. I imagine that many of you know why that might be, for my wife Melinda died seven weeks ago today. And let me say how much you all have done to support our daughter Marie-Noëlle and myself these past weeks. Feels like a real church...

We say it routinely: "We believe in the Resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." "I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

Amen, right? But what exactly are we talking about when we repeat these lines from the creeds?

Resurrection in the Gospels is a tricky subject. All four are tightly-written, intentional biographies of Jesus. John explicitly says, "these things are written so that you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and believing you may live in his name." (Jn. 20:31)

But when it comes to the actual resurrection, these carefully-composed narratives fall apart. It's as if they hit a wall. Mark has the women at the tomb hear that Jesus has been raised, and they leave, "because they were afraid." What kind of ending is that? John has four different stories, but oddly arranged. After the verse I just quoted, which makes a good ending, he then tacks on the story of the apostles eating breakfast with Jesus on a beach.

Matthew has the women running with joy to tell the disciples the good news, when they meet him on the road. Then Matthew introduces the apparently plausible explanation, in the mouths of the guards at the tomb, that the disciples stole the body while the guards were asleep. Which is ridiculous, because had they admitted to sleeping on sentry duty, they would have been executed. Then the disciples go to Galilee, where they had been told by the women to go. Matthew writes, "When they saw him, they worshipped him, though some doubted." What?

Luke, to finish, has the women go from the tomb and announce the resurrection to the apostles, but they don't believe them. Peter goes to the tomb and sees it empty, and wonders. At the same time, Jesus is appearing to the two disciples at Emmaus, and then appears to the disciples. Then he explains the Bible to them...

So why did these four careful authors suddenly fall all over themselves trying to report the resurrection? And why are they so different, whereas before this point, one can easily trace some significant cross-fertilization? You'd think they would have cleaned all this up. And if these stories were legends, or group hallucinations, or complete fabrications, they would have.

When the Church winnowed out the false gospels from the true, it wasn't because we *churchmen* wanted to hide the truth from you. No, the later gospels are very coherent from

beginning to end, whereas the oldest ones that everyone knew had been in use had peculiar endings. When you put all four together, there are significant differences. Especially in the ways they end.

Now it has been argued for centuries that the disciples, especially that Saul turned Paul, invented Christianity by taking the simple rabbi Jesus and making him into a god, with the resurrection as proof of his divinity. The only way one can argue this plausibly is by ignoring the four oldest texts and using the later texts, say, the Apocalypse of Peter or the Gospel of Mary, as a foundation. But the gospels were considered authentic because each burst at its narrative seams when they describe what happened to Jesus after he was killed.

Now, friends, we do not hold the Faith because we have the Bible. We believe the witness of the first disciples, that unassuming bunch of befuddled women and men who had experienced Jesus after his death. Not as a ghost, not as a powerful memory, but for real. How? They didn't understand.

And neither can we. The only thing that is certain is that, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, if Christ is not raised from the dead, our faith is null and void, and those whom we love who have died are lost forever. (I Cor. 15:12-19)

So what *can* we glean from the various stories of Easter? To start with, we are promised the same resurrection as Jesus, with a new body, in a new heaven and a new earth. When we die, as the psalmist says, in that day our thoughts perish. It is like a profound sleep or unconsciousness. There is no immortal part that escapes to another realm — that isn't Jesus, that's Plato.

What happens then is that the Holy Spirit begins to raise us up, to do what happened to Jesus' corpse: from the old dead creation came a new creation, over which the old conditions of death and sickness and old age and injustice and falsehood no longer apply. What left that tomb on the first Easter was something this world had never seen before, but was recognizable as well.

And that is what will happen to us, who live here right now. When death comes, we shall fall asleep, until the Spirit awakens us to the new creation we are becoming. The future that God has willed for each of us is to share a life without boundaries. Jesus' body now has no restrictions: neither will ours. As we read in the final chapter of the Bible,

[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away." (Rev. 21:4)

Now I know there are all kinds of questions that people raise. When does this happen? Right away? At the end of time? Is there an intermediate state called Purgatory, where we go to be cleansed before entering the unveiled presence of God? Then there's the Last Judgment? What about near-death experiences? And so on...

What I believe is that the fragmentary, unpolished resurrection stories in the Gospels are saying to us, besides Alleluia/Christ is risen/The Lord is risen indeed/Alleluia, is that we can become overly curious about something we fundamentally cannot understand.

There is only one thing that matters. At the moment of death everything falls away. All that we take into that seeming darkness is who loves us and whom we love. What is urgent this Easter Sunday is not disputing about life after death, but rather to take stock. Whom do I love, without profit to me? Who loves me, simply because I am me? What can I do to expand those two circles, to become richer in loving and being loved? Love is the only thing that never ends, and therefore love is the only true wealth.

And the love of God is endless, and relentless. God loves you with a fierceness shown on the Cross, with the overwhelming power that brought a new creation out of a tomb, God loves you and me in ways we can only imagine. And we can imagine that love — barely! — by the experience of loving and being loved.

As for Melinda, she rises from the dead. Present tense is, I think, the best way to speak of it. As for you and me, we only believe in the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come, sort of. But we too are already the start of a new creation. One day we too will rise.

But the question for us here and now is, how can we be more loving? How can we be more beloved?