

RESURRECTED? REALLY!

Ascension Day was last Thursday. I wonder how many of you planned special festivities for the celebration of Ascension Day. Isn't it strange, or at least interesting, that we make so little of Ascension Day? "*He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*" (Apostles' Creed) (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; John 6:62; 20:17; Acts 1:9; I Peter 3:22)

The Ascension would appear to be one of the great moments in our heritage, and in some ways the most triumphant moment of all. Few Protestants even know of the day, never mind when it is. Clearly we have no traditions of celebration or remembrance surrounding Ascension Day. Why is that?

On Easter we celebrate the Resurrection, but we normally mix it up with flowers and bunnies and egg hunts and new clothes until many people are not really sure what we mean. Is it all symbolic, a "Rite of Spring" when optimism is honored and we remember that it is good to be hopeful? Is that it, or do we really mean to claim that Jesus of Nazareth actually rose from the dead – came back to life somehow – after being slain on a cross? And do we mean that He truly is alive again, or do we mean, like we often say of others, that His impact was so great and He Himself so marvelous in our eyes that His influence lives on among us? Even coming down to right now, do we mean that we will always remember Him, or do we mean that He is *truly present and at work* among us: a living Being of power who communicates with us, directs and guides us – last night, today, and always?

On Easter Sunday we are busy celebrating and have little time or inclination for doubts or questions. After Easter we are quickly busy with other things. Whatever the reasons, it really is true that many people live in and around the church for years and seldom get a chance to formulate or question their real beliefs about this central and crucial truth. Does Jesus live or doesn't He, and how do you mentally approach that part of the Christian Faith? Hopefully we can all admit right here at the start that we do not, and do not expect to, fully understand the mysteries of God. But if we are going to be faithful in any meaningful sense, we do have to know the difference between what we believe and what we reject, and at least where the mystery begins.

The reason Christianity survived, developed, and became a world religion is that some people said they saw Jesus alive after He had been crucified. The Resurrection is what is important, but we only know about the Resurrection because of some folk who claimed to be witnesses. What was it like when they “saw” Jesus alive from the dead? What did they mean by that? What sort of experience was it to behold the Risen Christ? Were they deluded, or were they sane? Were they hallucinating from too much grief, or were they simply telling what happened? People who do not ask and wonder about such questions have been either brainwashed or somehow taught to be afraid to question. Faith untested by questions and doubts does not shape or direct life; it only anesthetizes it.

What kind of body did Jesus have after the Resurrection? It seems to appear and disappear at will. Sometimes beloved friends do not recognize Him at first when He appears. He walks through walls, yet Thomas touches His hands and sides. Jesus eats and speaks but also vanishes after each appearance.

Some of the appearances are described in very concrete terms. Others seem to be more powerful events but also more ethereal. Sometimes an appearance is to one or to just a few. Sometimes many are made aware at the same time, yet each in his or her own way. In short, there is no precision to the explanations or the descriptions. We could almost begin to conclude that the experiences are fanciful, except for one thing: The people who “see” Him are changed. The impact of the appearances on the witnesses is not doubtable. Their lives are altered, and for keeps. It sticks! They are not kidding. Even many years later they are still talking and acting and even dying *because* of the Resurrection. Perhaps the final clincher is that they do not always agree about it. Sometimes they are at each other’s throats over what to do about it. That is also the mark of authenticity. Nobody trumped this up. It is not staged. No ulterior motive explains the consequences.

Nevertheless, from our perspective at the moment, the accounts are far from satisfactory. If it was a different kind of body that Jesus was using, what happened to the old one? And this business of the Ascension – it’s no wonder we keep trying to forget it. At the time the Gospels were written, it made sense that a body could ascend into Heaven. The earth was flat, and Heaven was above the canopy of the stars. For fifteen hundred years or so, the Ascension was no problem.

Yet we live in a universe that has no “up.” If Jesus ascended, He would merely go into orbit (Christnik). Going “up” is no way to get to Heaven. But if He did not ascend, then what happened to the body? And why all the emphasis on an empty tomb? I mean, are we talking about resuscitation or are we talking about resurrection? A physical body coming back to life – essentially unchanged, essentially like a normal physical body – is interesting and has many side effects, but it is nothing to start a world religion over! Lazarus and many of us have been moved and changed and awakened by a spiritual encounter that went along with such a resuscitation event, putting us in closer contact with resurrection truth. But still, resurrection is an entirely different category from resuscitation. So let’s back up and get our picture straight before we get carried away with all the details and questions.

Sticking with basics, the reason for believing in the Resurrection is that people have encountered Jesus Christ alive after His death on the cross. An empty tomb, various conjectures about “how” it happened, and arguments between those who believe it one way or another or not at all may be interesting, but they are frills and do not really matter. The people who themselves encounter the Living Christ are witnesses to the Resurrection. Unless they are either liars or deluded, we have a real resurrection.

Not chronologically but historically, Paul is our earliest witness. Many had encountered Jesus alive before Paul did; after Paul’s own encounter, he came to know some of them personally. He comments about them in today’s Scripture reading. We learn more about them from Mark (who wrote around A.D. 65) and from Matthew and Luke (who wrote around A.D. 70), but ten years before Mark’s Gospel, Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians. Until we find earlier scrolls, Paul is our most authentic source of information about the Resurrection.

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” (I Corinthians 15:3-8)

So Paul's list of witnesses includes:

- 1.) Peter first. That's no surprise.
- 2.) The rest of "the twelve" (an additional ten, minus Peter and Judas).
- 3.) The "more than five hundred" we assume to be the Pentecost experience described in the second chapter of Acts – the birthday of the church and the coming of the Holy Spirit.
- 4.) James. Not the disciple, but one of Jesus' brothers who became head of the Jerusalem church. If there is a charlatan in the deck, he is my first choice, though not that he meant to be one on purpose.
- 5.) All the apostles. We can find no specific designation. It seems to be a statement to include a number of encounters without specifically going into each one. We can surmise incidents like that of Cleopas and a friend on the Emmaus Road. (Luke 24:13-35)
- 6.) Paul includes himself. "*Last of all, as to one untimely born*" We assume he means his own encounter on the Damascus Road – the reason he claims to be and is counted as one of the apostles.

I don't know what it sounds like to you just hearing this list of details. From my side, the picture is dynamic and thrilling. From our earliest tradition, all of these encounters are considered authentic. Thomas touches Jesus' hands and side. Peter and six of the twelve eat breakfast with Jesus after a second large catch of fish. Paul is struck by an incredibly powerful encounter, but those around him are not included in the impact. At Pentecost, a crowd is touched all at the same time, yet each one "hears" intimately and personally. All these encounters are taken by the church to be the same phenomena and to have come from the same source. They are all evidence of the Resurrected Christ. Furthermore, the participants share a common reaction: they are all henceforth certain of the reality of the spiritual realms, they are sure of eternal life, and they are dedicated and devoted to Jesus' mission and ministry on earth as the only purpose in life worth living or dying for.

That means, simply, that encountering the Risen Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit are the *same* experience! Conversion *is the result* of an encounter with the Risen Christ. There is no other way “in” to the Christian Faith and Life. Skeptics keep wanting some nonbeliever to bear witness to Jesus’ Resurrection, but that complaint is not thought through very well. Thomas and Paul are excellent illustrations: One second before the encounter, they were not believers. The problem is, nobody can encounter the Risen Christ and remain a nonbeliever. By definition, a believer is one who personally knows the reality of the Living Christ.

And this may be minor to you, but it is not to me: At least two of these encounters (Pentecost and the Damascus Road) occur *after* the Ascension – meaning, the Ascension is not the end of Jesus’ appearances. (“*Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*”) The Ascension does not close down anything. Rather, it seems to be another time when Jesus “disappears” after an encounter, just like He does after all the appearances. And those present at the Ascension jumped to some conclusions and described it according to their own world view (naturally).

So also, Paul’s poetic “*Last of all, as to one untimely born*” does not mean he will be the last. He is the last one on his list at the moment. Or maybe he is mistaken, thinking Jesus had shut things down for a few weeks or months until He could come for the final consummation. In any case, Paul is not the last. Jesus has appeared and continues to appear to thousands of us, down to this present day. And we have no reason to expect that He will stop doing so.

Did I not myself encounter the Risen Christ decades ago, when I was a boy? Paul writes this letter to the Corinthians only twenty years after his encounter. Knowing how little I have forgotten my own experience and knowing how it has affected my life down through the years, I have no problem thinking Paul remembers his first encounter. And haven’t most of you had your own encounters with the Risen Christ? Of course, and at last you are beginning to share such things with each other. That is where the bond and fellowship of the Christian church originates and is formed. People keep trying to make a church on the basis of what fine and compatible people we are, but that will not make it or even come close. The church lives where people know they have been visited by the Living Christ – and know they will continue to be.

I am not trying to persuade anyone to believe in the Resurrection. It has been some time since I thought that sort of approach could be valuable or valid. From my perspective, the evidence is so overwhelming that it needs no defense or apology. Besides that, belief comes from encounter, not from argument.

But I do sometimes try to keep the landscape clear of some of the underbrush that I think obscures the issues and makes the process more difficult than necessary. The fact remains that if a person does not believe Jesus to be resurrected, then for that person it is not yet the truth. It therefore cannot illumine their life or bring them hope, no matter how authentic and true it is.

We cannot make up the truth. Nevertheless, we do have to be able to recognize the divine in our midst. There are burning bushes all over the landscape all the time. It takes a Moses to turn aside and go find out what is behind one of them. The difference is not in the event; hundreds of people were being crucified, and thousands of people are dying still. The difference is in the recognition: Something different is going on. And suddenly, inexplicably, we are in the midst of wonder and mystery and an encounter we in no way could trump up or control. It is not just the events going on around us; it is our recognition of the divine within those events that makes the difference for us.

If you have not already done so this post-Easter season, it is important to bring to clear memory the times of your own most-certain encounters with the Risen Christ. Do they have the place of honor in your interior life? Are they still able to provide the setting for your continued guidance and hope and faith?

And if you do not count yourself yet as one of the witnesses to His Resurrection but would like to be, do not be discouraged. If you really wish to be His servant, it is not far off. Ask quietly each morning for a visit. Do not press or get urgent or dramatic. Watch for burning bushes throughout each day – meaning, keep alert. Do not miss a day. Remind yourself that Christ wants the encounter at least as much as you do. And check each day to be sure there is nothing more important to you – that is, nothing standing in the way of such an encounter. If you do even these simple things, you will not make it through a month. The Lord is very real and does not delay.