

The Resurrection of Jesus

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It is certainly easy to understand why we celebrate Easter in the spring. There are signs of new life all around us. The trees have new leaves, the grass is green, the flowers are blooming, and the days are getting longer. The new life in the world around us reminds us of the new life we have in Christ.

On Easter Sunday and during the Easter season, while nature shouts, “new life,” we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the new life we have in him.

Our belief in the resurrection is core to our faith. All of our other beliefs hinge on the Resurrection. Paul stated this very clearly in his first letter to the Corinthians. It seems that some of the Corinthians did not believe in the Resurrection of the body. As Paul argued his belief and the belief of the Church, he explained the centrality of the Resurrection: “...and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17-19).

Paul told the Corinthians that, because Jesus rose from the dead, they have new life both on earth and after their life on earth. They have new life on earth because they have been forgiven their sins and invited to live in a relationship of covenant love with God. They have new life after life on earth because, just as Jesus passed through death to life, so will those who have faith in Jesus.

Since the Resurrection is core to our faith, let us look at some of the Gospel stories surrounding Jesus’ Resurrection so that we can more deeply understand what the inspired authors are teaching us. We cannot read an account of the Resurrection itself since no one witnessed that. But we can read two kinds of stories that show that the Resurrection occurred: empty tomb stories and post-resurrection appearance stories.

Empty Tomb Stories

The three synoptic Gospel authors’ empty tomb stories have a great deal in common. They all picture Mary Magdalene and another women going to Jesus’ tomb immediately after the Sabbath in order to anoint the body. In Mark and Luke, when the women approach the tomb the stone that blocked its entrance had already been rolled back. In Matthew the stone was removed by an earthquake and an angel after the women arrive.

In all three Gospels a messenger from heaven, described either as an angel or as men dressed in dazzling white, announces the Resurrection. In Matthew’s account the angel says, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.” (Matthew 28:5-6).

In addition to having much in common, each of the Gospel authors has his own unique way of telling the stories surrounding Jesus. The unique aspects of the stories give us an insight into each Gospel author's particular interest and emphasis.

Was the Body Stolen?

Sometimes a Gospel author includes specific details in order to argue against misunderstandings or charges that he knows are on the minds of those in his audience. We read earlier that Paul argued so fervently about the Resurrection of the body because some people in Corinth were denying it. Evidently some in Matthew's audience had been told that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Instead, they were told that his followers could claim a resurrection even though a resurrection had not occurred.

To counter this charge, Matthew includes details that we do not find in the other accounts. After Jesus is buried the chief priests and the Pharisees go to Pilate and say, "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first.' Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.' So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone" (Matthew 27:63-66).

By telling the story in this way Matthew demonstrates that the disciples could not have stolen the body. Also, as we already noted, in Matthew when the women arrive the stone is still in place. The stone is removed by an earthquake and an angel. This means that Jesus arose while the stone was still in place.

Then Matthew accounts for the "rumor" that the body had been stolen. "While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, 'You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So they took the money and did as they were directed." (Matthew 28:11-15).

On first reading this passage you might think that Matthew was painting a very negative picture of the Jews. However, Matthew was a Jew himself and his audience was Jewish. In his Gospel, Matthew was teaching his fellow Jews that Jesus was the new Moses who has authority from God to give a new law. In this story he is responding to a question that may well be on the mind of his audience: "Why was Jesus rejected by the leaders of his, and our, own religious tradition?"

In response to this question Matthew emphasizes the dishonesty of the particular religious leaders who turned Jesus over to the Roman court in order to have him crucified. Matthew's words cannot be used to paint a negative picture of Jews generally. The Jews are Matthew's own beloved people.

Faith Rooted in Love

The empty tomb stories in the Gospel of John also have unique details. In fact, John introduced a character who appeared first at the last supper and continues to have a prominent role through the remainder of his Gospel. This person is never named, but is simply called, “the beloved disciple,” or “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

Scripture scholars believe that John introduced this character not to hide his own identity, as you may have been taught, but to emphasize that love is most important in one’s relationship with Christ. In Gospel according to John it is the beloved disciple who first believes, even before he has seen the risen Christ.

In John’s account, when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and discovered the stone rolled back, there was no heavenly messenger to tell her the significance of what she had seen. John tells us that she ran to “...Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him’” (John 20:2). An empty tomb by itself does not lead Mary to believe in the resurrection. Mary will come to that understanding very soon when Jesus appears to her and calls her by name. (See John 20:11-18).

On receiving this alarming news, Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved come to the tomb. “The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, . . . Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed” (John 20:4-6, 8).

In this account the disciple whom Jesus loved gets to the tomb first—love always gets there first. That disciple respects Peter’s particular role and waits for Peter. But the disciple whom Jesus loved is the first to believe. In fact, only this beloved disciple believed before a post-resurrection appearance. John’s account teaches us that a deep personal relationship of love with Jesus Christ is the most fertile ground for faith.

Post-Resurrection Appearance Stories

As was true with the empty tomb stories, each Gospel has post-resurrection appearance stories, but they differ from each other in details.

In order to understand the stories it helps to remember just how devastated and disillusioned the Apostles were by the events that had taken place. The Apostles had put their hopes in Jesus, but they had misunderstood who Jesus is and what Jesus is about. Jesus’ followers were hoping that Jesus would free them from Roman domination. In the past God had sent messiahs and anointed ones to free Gods’ people from political domination.

But instead of defeating the Romans, Jesus had apparently been defeated by them. Jesus had received the death penalty and had died on the cross. To make matters worse, the Apostles had not been faithful to their beloved teacher and leader; instead they had all fled. Now, after the resurrection, but before they know that the resurrection has occurred, the disciples locked themselves in a room, living in fear. Many people, before they know the risen Christ, lived lives of fear.

In Mark's post-resurrection appearance story Jesus rebukes the eleven remaining apostles "for their unbelief and hardness of heart," but he nevertheless commissions them to "proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15b). Mark, throughout his Gospel, emphasizes the failure of the apostles. This is because he is writing to people who are facing persecution. He wants them to see both the humanity of Jesus and the failures of the Apostles; that way they can identify with Jesus' suffering and the Apostles' weakness, and see the importance of remaining faithful under the most difficult circumstances.

In the Gospels according to Luke and John, Jesus offers the Apostles peace. John tells us that "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' . . . The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'" (John 20:19b, 20b-21). Jesus offers peace not as a greeting or a wish, but as a gift. Those who live lives of fidelity to the risen Christ experience internal peace.

On the Road to Emmaus

Among the disciples who were disappointed and disillusioned were the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. (See Luke 24:13-35.) Only Luke tells us this wonderful story. As the two disciples walked along on the first day of the week—the Sunday Jesus rose—they were "...talking with each other about all these things that had happened" (Luke 24:14). Jesus joined them on the road, but they did not recognize him. This is Luke's way of telling us that as we travel the journey of life, we too might fail to recognize the risen Christ in the strangers we meet along the way.

The two disciples were "looking sad." They have not yet heard the good news. They explain to the stranger their reason for being so depressed. They told him all that had occurred, how their hopes had been dashed by Jesus' crucifixion, and that some women were claiming that he was still alive. They obviously did not believe this claim or they would not be so downcast.

On hearing this the stranger says, "'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:25-27). This is Luke's way of telling us that we can find the risen Christ in Scripture. It is because we believe in the Resurrection that we proclaim the Scripture every time we gather in Christ's name at Mass.

As the disciples approach their destination, they invite the stranger to stay with them. "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him . . ." (Luke 24:30-31). You probably recognize the Eucharistic language in this account. At the Passover meal, as Jesus institutes what we have come

to call the sacrament of Eucharist, Luke uses the same language. Luke tells us that Jesus “took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me’” (Luke 22:19).

By repeating this eucharistic language Luke is telling us that we too encounter the risen Christ when we celebrate the Eucharist.

Jesus Commissions the Apostles

The commissioning of the apostles is part of every Gospel’s post-resurrection appearance stories. Again, the details unique to each Gospel reveal that author’s particular emphasis.

Matthew

In Matthew’s Gospel the commissioning takes place on a mountain in Galilee. We said earlier that Matthew is teaching his fellow Jews that Jesus is the new Moses who has authority from God to teach the new law. You will remember that when Moses received the law he received it on a mountain. (See Exodus 19.) In Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus teaches the new law, he teaches from a mountain. (See Matthew 5:1.) Now the apostles, following the angel’s instructions to Mary Magdalene (See Matthew 28:7.), have returned to that mountain in Galilee.

Jesus appears to them and says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20). Notice the emphasis on Jesus’ power, his authority. Jesus passes on that authority to the Apostles. To this day we honor the orderly passing on of apostolic authority, the authority that Jesus gave the Apostles, in the organization of our Church.

Jesus also names the mission of the Church: to make disciples of all nations. The Church exists to evangelize. However, the Church will not be left to its own devices to carry out our mission. Jesus promises that he is with us always.

Luke

In Gospel according to Luke the commissioning of the disciples takes place in Jerusalem. Jesus begins by offering the disciples peace. Jesus then assures them that the person who is appearing to them is the person who was crucified by showing them the wounds on his hands and feet. Then Jesus, as he did with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, opens their minds to the Scripture. Jesus says, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:46-48).

Notice Luke's emphasis on the forgiveness of sin. This has been an emphasis of Luke's throughout his Gospel. Only in Luke is Jesus pictured as forgiving those who crucified him. (See Luke 23:34) In doing this, Jesus sets an example for us. As we repent and receive forgiveness for our sins we realize that we must also be willing to forgive those who have sinned against us.

John

In John's commissioning story, Jesus not only commissions the disciples but gives them the Holy Spirit. After offering them peace Jesus says, "'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:21b –22). It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that the apostles will have the understanding, the courage, and the power to carry out their mission.

New Life in Christ

It is also through the power of the Spirit that we come to understand and live out our new life in Christ. Because Jesus rose from the dead our life is changed both on earth and into eternity. We now know that we are beloved children of God. We know that we are invited to live in a relationship of covenant love with God all of our life. We know that if we are faithful to this call we will act lovingly toward all we meet, trying, in both our words and our actions, to be faithful witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Finally, we know that death is not death. Just as Jesus rose from the dead, so will we. During the Easter season we celebrate new life, both on earth and in eternity.

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