

THE ETERNAL TRUTH INSIDE THE MYTHS OF RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION

To literalize Easter has become the defining heresy of traditional Protestant and Catholic Christianity. That transforming mystery has given way to propositional truths.

We come now to that crucial moment that made Christianity possible. We celebrate it at Easter. We call it resurrection. Was it real? If the resurrection is not real, then there appears to be nothing left to Christianity that is sufficient to elicit any interest. That is certainly what Paul appeared to believe when he wrote, "If Christ has not been raised, . . . we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:17-19). Our quest to discover the Jesus of history now comes up against this final test. Here myth must be separated from reality and a decision made. The issue is usually posed by saying that either resurrection is real or Christianity was built on an illusion and will not endure. I do not believe it is quite so simple.

I understand the concern and even the anxiety that many feel when they reach this ultimate crossroad in our faith story, but we cannot avoid it. The question that needs to be addressed is, What is it to which we must say yes or no? In other words, What is resurrection? I can, with absolute honesty and with deep conviction, say that I believe the

resurrection of Jesus was real. To support that assertion I can point to data that reveal in very objective ways that something of great and significant power happened following the crucifixion of Jesus, something that had dramatic and life-changing consequences. Those resulting changes are easy to document. That which caused the changes is not.

In an earlier context we noted what seems to be the absolutely historical fact that Jesus faced apostolic abandonment when he was arrested. We have documented the overwhelming probability that Jesus died alone. What we need to look at now is the equally real fact of history that after the crucifixion some experience of great magnitude brought Jesus' disciples back, empowered them and gave them the courage to take up the cause of this Jesus in the face of persecution and martyrdom. They never wavered. The strength of their conviction was such that no threat or fear could now separate them from the God they believed they had met in Jesus. When they began to give content to this transforming experience, the words they used were "Death cannot contain him," and "We have seen the Lord." Something must have accounted for this dramatic change in their lives.

Simultaneously, we can also document the fact that the way the disciples understood God was changed by whatever that Easter experience was. The heart of Judaism was voiced in the declaration of faith known as the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord your God is one." As affirmed in the Shema, a Jew must never bow his or her head to anything other than the holy God. After the death of Jesus, however, these same Jewish disciples had their understanding of God transformed to the place where they no longer saw Jesus apart from God. Jesus of Nazareth had become for them the human face of God.¹ The Jewish Thomas was made to say to the Jewish Jesus, "[You are] my Lord and my God" (John 20:28). Something had to account for this dramatic change.

A third new reality was born when whatever the resurrection experience was got identified with the first day of the week and gave birth to a new holy day. Within a single generation the Christian Sunday began to rival the Jewish sabbath for supremacy, even among the Jewish disciples of Jesus.

People do not change or even expand sacred traditions easily. For that reason, the fundamental changes named above, among other

things, compel me to assert that whatever it was that the early Christians came to call Easter is real. Stirring shifts in consciousness, along with dramatic changes in character, theology and worship, gripped the followers of Jesus at some point following the crucifixion. These data cannot be dismissed as trivial, for they are in fact quite substantial and quite real. None of these data, however, tells us what happened—only that *something* happened.

What the Easter experience was is an altogether different question. When we go to the details of the resurrection as found in the gospels, we are confronted with a host of assertions that are contradictory, confusing and baffling. Most traditional believers have never faced these realities in their faith story. For example, it is a fact that it was the ninth decade of the Christian era before a single written source suggested that the dramatic changes I have described were actually caused by Jesus walking physically out of his tomb, as a resuscitated body ready to take up life again in this world. Paul does not say that. Mark has no story of a physical appearance of a risen Jesus. Matthew is ambivalent: of his two resurrection narratives, the first, involving the women at the tomb, appears to be physical, but the second, involving the disciples in Galilee, is more like a vision. Only when one gets to Luke and John, the last two canonical gospels to be composed (which take us to the late ninth and to the tenth decades), does the interpretation of Easter begin to involve stories of the physicality of the resurrected body of Jesus walking out of the tomb. In time, certainly from the second century on, when creeds began to take shape, this quite obviously late-developing tradition would literally overwhelm the earlier nonphysical tradition and begin to form the now common understanding of Easter.

The next thing that a serious student of the New Testament must embrace is that, even though these books have been called by the church “the word of God” and claims have been made for them through the ages as the source of ultimate authority, there is still substantial disagreement in these texts about almost every detail in this central moment of the origins of Christianity. Let me point out a few inconsistencies briefly. Was there a tomb in a garden where Jesus was buried? While the gospels make much of a tomb, Paul appears never to have heard of one (1 Cor. 15:1–11). The book of Acts seems to

imply that Jesus was buried by the same people who killed him (Acts 13:29). We know from our study of this period of history that in conquered Judea an elaborate burial for the body of a convicted and executed felon (which is what Jesus was) was all but unknown. Normally, the victim would be placed into a shallow grave along with the other executed criminals of that day, covered over to prevent offensive odors, and soon forgotten. Wild dogs scavenging during the night feasted on the victims' bodies under cover of darkness, and whatever was left decomposed quickly in that climate.

Next the gospels tell us that a group of women went to the tomb on the first day of the week. Paul has no mention of this tradition. The gospels all do; however, they do not agree on exactly who the women were or what their number was. Mark has three women, Matthew two, Luke five or six and John only one. No gospel writer agrees with another on this minor detail. Did these women see the risen Lord on that first Easter morning? Mark says no; Matthew says yes; Luke says no; John says yes. The gospels also disagree on who the messenger was who announced the resurrection. It was a young man dressed in a white robe, says Mark (16:5). It was a supernatural angel who came out of the sky and who possessed sufficient supernatural power to put the guards to sleep and roll back the stone from the door of the sepulcher, says Matthew (28:2-4). It was "two men in dazzling apparel" and thus presumably angels, says Luke (24:4). When one comes to John, it is still two angels, but one of them seems to morph into Jesus himself (20:11-18).

The New Testament writers do not agree on who was the first witness to the resurrection. It was Cephas, says Paul (1 Cor. 15:5). Mark has no first witness, since he provides only the promise that the disciples will see Jesus when they return to Galilee. Matthew says the first ones to see the resurrected Jesus were the women in the garden (28:9). Luke says it was Cleopas and his traveling companion (24:13-35). John says it was Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18). The gospels do not even agree on where the disciples were when the Easter experience broke in upon them: It will be in Galilee, says Mark (16:7). It was in Galilee on top of a mountain, says Matthew (28:16-20). It was never in Galilee, says Luke; it was only in Jerusalem or in the Jerusalem area (24:36, 49). It was in Jerusalem first and much later in Galilee, says John (20:1ff., 21:1).

The gospels do not agree on the order in which the experiences we now call resurrection, ascension and Pentecost actually happened. Resurrection and ascension were the same thing, says Paul (Rom. 1:1-4). Between Jesus' appearance to the women in the garden and the appearance of Jesus to the disciples on the mountaintop, Jesus entered a heavenly realm, says Matthew (28:16-20). It was a three-fold action over fifty days, with resurrection on Easter, ascension forty days later and Pentecost ten days after that, says Luke (Luke 24, Acts 1, 2). It was resurrection on Easter morn, ascension on Easter day following Jesus' appearance to Magdalene alone, and Pentecost on Easter evening, when Jesus "breathed on [the disciples]" and they received the Holy Spirit, says John (John 20:1, 17-23).

Suddenly we are forced into an awareness of the complexity that is present in understanding that revelatory moment which stands at the very center of Christianity itself. Embrace this reality consciously. First these are powerful data, which scream that something of great significance happened after the crucifixion of Jesus that had the capacity to transform the disciples from fleeing cowards into unflinching persons of enormous strength, to change the way they conceptualized God and to give birth to a new holy day. Second, there is the undisputed fact that almost every detail that became part of the disciples' explanation was in conflict and in disagreement with another account. Finally, it is an observable fact that the later the narrative, the more obviously supernatural and miraculous it becomes. These are the issues that we must address if we are to enter the confusion that surrounds the birth of Christianity.

I now begin this probe by the observation that what the disciples experienced in Jesus compelled them to go beyond the limits of their own humanity. Whatever Easter was, it called them beyond fear, as the heroic post-Easter behavior of the disciples reveals; it called them beyond tribal identity, as the story of the Holy Spirit giving them the ability to speak the language of their hearers makes clear (Acts 2); it called them beyond the limits of their religion, as the creation of a new holy day proclaims, and it called them beyond their sense of their own mortality, as their resurrection language illustrates. So what these followers of Jesus did was exactly what the Jews did in the revelatory moment of the exodus: they began to express their experience through

liturgy. The content of the resurrection narratives in the gospels, like the content of the crucifixion story, has a liturgical form about it.

Indications that the explanations of Easter are being conveyed by the language form of a worship setting are plentiful in the gospels. The Jewish Passover with its common meal is a liturgical reenactment of Jewish origins, and it is also the context in which the gospel writers assert that the resurrection is first known. This resurrection is observed on the new liturgical holy day of the Christian movement, the first day of the week. Its content reflects time and again the liturgical language of its eucharistic context—for example, Luke notes that Cleopas and the other man on the road to Emmaus reported that “[Jesus] was made known to them in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35). Finally, it is couched in the language of a return to one’s roots, one’s homeland: “He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him” (Mark 16:7). Matthew fills in the details: the disciples went to Galilee, “and when they saw him they worshipped him” (Matt. 28:17). None of this means that the transforming experience we call Easter was not real. It does mean that it was like an ecstatic moment breaking in upon their consciousness from another realm, another reality before which they were awestruck and to which they could respond only with worship. As noted earlier, the followers of Jesus had no God language through which to talk about this profound God experience, so they reverted to the best thing that they did have, which was the language of liturgy, in which human beings believe themselves to be united in spirit with whatever they think God is. Any attempt to literalize this liturgical language of worship is to miss completely the meaning of the resurrection experience.

The resurrection language of the gospels is literal nonsense. Earthquakes do not announce earthly events. Angels do not invade time, space and history to roll back a stone, to make a historic resurrection announcement. A resuscitated Jesus does not walk out of his tomb in some physical form that can eat, drink, walk, talk, teach and expound on scriptures. This “raised” bodily person does not appear and disappear at will, walk through walls, or invite the doubters to feel his wounds. He cannot be the agent who accomplished the miraculous catch of fish on the Sea of Galilee, or the one who departed from the disciples by defying gravity and rising up into the sky of a three-tiered

universe. All of these things are interpretive tales employed in the process of human explanation in which a life-changing inner experience was enabled to be communicated in the language of history by the use of external symbols. That is what liturgy is.

We need to trace the Easter story developmentally. It was first, above all else, an ecstatic experience. Second, that ecstatic experience became the subject of exclamation, an ecstatic cry without details. Only in the third stage does the exclamation get turned into an explanatory narrative. In the Easter moment the ecstatic experience was the dawning realization that death could not bind the God presence the disciples had met in Jesus of Nazareth. The ejaculatory exclamation was, "Death no longer has dominion over him" (Rom. 6:9)—that is, death cannot contain him. The explanation then evolved into the narrative of an empty tomb, a grave and grave clothes, all symbols of death that were unable to contain or to bind Jesus.

One should note that the later stories of Easter were all developed from Mark's original narrative, in which no one sees the risen Christ. In Mark's gospel the women followers simply stare into a tomb that has not been able to contain him. By the time we get to John's account, some thirty years later, Thomas seeks to feel the nail prints. That is quite a journey.

"Death cannot contain him" is finally a negative claim. There is also a positive exclamation, however. The positive claim is that the disciples' eyes have been opened so that they can say, "I have seen the Lord." It is the explanatory side of this positive explanation that finally produces accounts of sightings of Jesus. To see him "raised," however, does not necessarily mean to feel his flesh; it means to embrace his meaning.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians in the midfifties, provides us with not a single descriptive detail; he says only that "Christ was raised" (1 Cor. 15:4). Mark, likewise, never describes an appearance of the risen Jesus. Matthew says he appeared out of heaven. Luke says he was known in the breaking of bread. John says Jesus forbade Mary to touch him because he had not yet ascended to his Father. All of these episodes are filled with the language of a revelatory encounter; they describe a different kind of seeing. It is more like the seeing of insight, or second sight. It is not the language of physical sight and literal history.

The resurrection was not and is not a photographic phenomenon. Yet the words "We have seen the Lord" finally, and I suspect inevitably, give way to graphic explanations that portray Jesus as still inside the only realm of existence in which human language can work, because we have no other way to use the words of our own creation.

The fact that "the third day" came to be thought of as the day of the resurrection, or Easter, is one more sign that the context for the earliest interpretation of Jesus was liturgical, not literal. Three days in the Bible means a short time, just as forty days in the Bible means a longer time. That is, it is a reference not to a specific time, but to an imprecise measure of time. Three days is used in a variety of nonliteral ways, as a quick look at a biblical concordance will reveal. Even more telling is the way this three-day symbol dances around in the gospel story. Was it "after" three days, as Mark has Jesus predict on three different occasions (8:31, 9:31, 10:34)? Or was it "on the third day," as Matthew and Luke assert, deliberately editing Mark's numbering system in their gospel accounts (Matt. 16:21, 17:23, 20:19, Luke 9:22, 18:33)? That is not the only variable. Matthew later has Jesus refer to the "three days and three nights" that he would be in the midst of the earth, emulating the time that Jonah was in the belly of the whale (Matt. 12:40). Adding additional confusion to this time factor, Mark says that Jesus will meet his disciples in Galilee, and Matthew says that that promise was fulfilled. If the resurrected Jesus was seen in Galilee, such a literal sighting could not possibly have occurred either on or after three days, because Galilee would have been a seven- to ten-day journey from Jerusalem in those days. Luke, writing in the book of Acts, stretches the appearances of Jesus over the familiar forty-day time span, culminating his narrative with the story of Jesus' ascension (Acts 1). When John adds the appendix to his gospel (chapter 21) to provide an account of a Galilean resurrection appearance, his text reveals that a long period of time has elapsed since the first Easter Sunday. This means that John is suggesting that resurrection appearances continued for quite a while, perhaps even months, before finally coming to an end.

What makes the power of the three-day symbol even more intriguing is that it serves to locate the founding moment of the Christian story on the same day that the faith community gathered to reenact the liturgy of its origins. What the Passover did for the exodus in interpret-

ing the beginning of Judaism in the Red Sea, the Eucharist did for Christians in the description of their origins in the moment of resurrection. It should also be noted that Paul had earlier written that this eucharistic action, derived from the Last Supper, was the clue to understanding or interpreting the meaning of Jesus' death: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). The Christian Eucharist and the resurrection both became signs of the coming of the kingdom of God. Mark makes that theme obvious when at the Last Supper he has Jesus say, "I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:25). That was clearly a messianic claim. Matthew repeats Mark's words almost verbatim. Luke suggests that this meal is the clue to an understanding of Jesus' suffering. In the Passover, the Jews had to endure the symbolic death in the Red Sea in order to arrive in the Promised Land. The church made Jesus' death a symbolic death for all people and his resurrection was the sign of being born again to the new life of the spirit. Similar themes were wrapped around the church's initiation rite of baptism. John omits the Last Supper from his gospel altogether, but he transforms the appearance of Jesus to Peter and the disciples by the sea in Galilee into a Eucharist. In this narrative, however, John has Jesus only "take" and "give" the bread (John 21:13), whereas in earlier accounts of the eucharistic meal all of the eucharistic verbs—"take," "bless," "break" and "give"—are recorded. John has in the body of the gospel identified Jesus already as the bread of life, which means that because his body was blessed and broken on the cross, those actions need not be repeated literally when Jesus eats with his disciples by the lake in Galilee. The fact is, however, that everywhere one turns in the resurrection narratives of the New Testament, one finds the language of liturgy, of ecstasy, of transcendent breakthrough. It is not the language of time, space and history. It is not to be literalized and bound by our human limits any more than the Jesus about whom this language was originally used can be bound by human limits and especially by the limits of mortality.

Over history the resurrection stories of the various gospels have flowed together in the common mind until their differences have become totally blurred and their content blended into a kind of harmony that a

careful reading of these texts will not sustain. I have tried to separate them, but in order to make the story complete I need to point to a uniquely Lucan narrative which many people confuse with the resurrection. I refer to the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Why Luke needed to develop the ascension story is itself noteworthy. More than any writer before him, Luke transformed the resurrection into a physical, literal account of a resuscitated body. When Luke has Jesus appear to the disciples for the first time, they think they are seeing a ghost. To counter this nonphysical interpretation, Luke has Jesus invite them to touch his hands and feet. Ghosts or spirits do not have flesh and bones, he argues. It is a very physical claim. Then this risen, non-ghostlike Jesus asks for food. He is provided with a piece of broiled fish, which he eats, thus demonstrating that his gastrointestinal system is working fully. Then he does for them what he had previously done for Cleopas in Luke's first resurrection narrative—he "open[s] their minds to understand the scriptures" and provides the disciples with their missionary marching orders: "Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached . . . to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." He then commands the disciples to stay in the city until they are "clothed with power from on high" (24:44–50). Only then does Jesus part from them (v. 51).

Where did Jesus go at that point? Luke had portrayed him as physically resuscitated back into the life of this world, as we just saw. That presented Luke with a problem, since normally the only way to get out of this world is to die. Jesus had tried that; but if resurrection means, as it appears to Luke to mean, physical resuscitation back into the life of this world, then death did not provide him with an exit. This necessitated the development by Luke of a different exit strategy for Jesus. That is exactly what he provides in the opening chapter of the book of Acts: Luke has Jesus rise into the sky, with two men dressed in white robes interpreting his departure and predicting his second coming. His disciples, plus the women and the mother of Jesus and even his brothers, then return to an upper room to await the empowerment that was to come at Pentecost.

Clearly the story of the ascension is not history. When one rises into the sky, one does not get to heaven. One either goes into orbit or escapes the gravitational pull of the earth and drifts into the infinity of space.

When we search for Hebrew antecedents of the story of Jesus' ascension, our attention is drawn once again to the familiar cycle of Elijah-Elisha stories. Elijah also ascended into heaven. Elijah also be-stowed his spirit on his successor disciple. A careful reading of that story reveals that Luke simply magnified Elijah's ascension to create his story of Jesus' ascension (2 Kings 2).

Elijah needed the help of a fiery chariot drawn by magical fiery horses to propel him heavenward. He was also assisted by a God-sent whirlwind to provide additional thrust into the sky. Jesus, the new Elijah, ascends on his own. Elijah poured out a double portion of his enormous but still human spirit on his single disciple, Elisha. Jesus poured out the power of God's Holy Spirit on the gathered Christian community in sufficient measure to last through all the centuries. Luke takes the fire from Elijah's horse-drawn chariot and turns it into the tongues of fire that dance on the heads of the disciples without burning them and he takes the propelling whirlwind from the Elijah story and turns it into the "mighty rushing wind" that filled the upper room.

We are not reading history; we are watching the gospel writer paint a portrait drawn from the Hebrew scriptures, designed to present the Jesus experience as an invitation into oneness with God; and in that portrait he uses the only language he has available, the magnificent language of his religious tradition.

We need to embrace the fact that even at the central moment in the Christian story, there was originally something moving and profound, something which transformed life, but it was something that human words could not fully embrace. To literalize Easter, both the story of the resurrection and the story of the ascension, has become the defining heresy of traditional Protestant and Catholic Christianity. That transforming mystery has given way to propositional truths that no twenty-first-century mind can still embrace.

The Jesus story, including the narrative of the resurrection, is an invitation to journey beyond human limits, beyond human boundaries, into the realm of that experience we call God, who is not above the sky, but rather is found in the depths of life. To enter the Christian story we must have our eyes opened to see things beyond the limits of sight, and our ears unstopped to hear music beyond the human range

of sound. Our tongues then become loosed so that we can utter the sounds of ecstasy and life itself becomes opened until it is no longer bounded by death. That is the journey which the Christian faith bids us begin. So we hear Jesus' invitation, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:38), and we listen to Jesus' promise, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

The first stage of our faith journey, the clearing out of distortions in the way we view the Jesus story, is now complete. The literalness of centuries of misinterpretation of the Jesus story has been broken open. The pieces lie before us in frightening array. Jesus was born in a perfectly normal way in Nazareth. His mother was not the icon of virgin purity. His earthly father, Joseph, was a literary creation. His family thought he was out of his mind. He probably did not have twelve male disciples. He had disciples who were both male and female. He did not command nature to obey him. He did not in any literal sense give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf or wholeness to the paralyzed and infirm. He did not raise the dead. There was no stylized Last Supper in which bread was identified with his broken body and wine with his poured-out shed blood designed to symbolize his final prediction of death. There was no betrayal and no romance connected with his death, no mocking crowd, no crown of thorns, no words from the cross, no thieves, no cry of thirst and no darkness at noon. There was no tomb, no Joseph of Arimathea, no earthquake, no angel who rolled back the stone. There was no resuscitated body that emerged from that tomb on the third day, no touching of the wounds of Jesus, no opening by him of the secrets of scripture. Finally, there was no ascension into a heaven that exists above the sky.

All of these narrative details were the creation of a community of people who individually and corporately had an experience that they believed was of God in the human life of one Jesus of Nazareth. Their way of explaining their experience has now run its course. It makes assumptions we cannot make. It uses categories of thought we cannot use. The traditional explanation of the Jesus experience is dying. For many, it is already dead. Traditional Christians have committed the fatal error of identifying the truth of the Jesus experience with the literalness of their explanations of that experience. That never works. Every

explanation dies when its time dies. The death of the explanation, however, does not mean the death of the experience. Our task is to separate the eternal experience from the time-bound and time-warped explanations. To that task we now turn. It will take us behind, perhaps underneath, the biblical story to a place where traditional Christians have been loath to go. There is no alternative. The journey must continue until we see a new light that ignites a future hope.