

The RESURRECTION of CHRIST

How are we to comprehend the seeming incomprehensible?

a paper prepared for discussion by Christopher Tyack, parishioner, Holy Trinity, Valley

Although the resurrection of Jesus is popularly thought to have been bodily, scripture yields alternative “spiritual” interpretations. The depictions of Luke and John have especially captured the general mind, as has Jesus’ bodily dwelling on earth for a period of forty days before his ascension.

Such a conventional view has a recent advocate in N.T. Wright. Yet it at once gives rise to questions about the veracity of the empty tomb and the ethereality of Jesus’ appearances after his death; nor does it explain Paul’s spiritual view of the resurrection life in 1 Cor. 15, nor how bread, wine and even the worshipping community may be called his “body”.

Many scholars have assumed that, if the disciples did not encounter their Lord bodily, they must have encountered him by apparitions, the objectivity of which was undecidable. Yet, as a number of recent scholars advocate, a further mode of his appearing was in worship, and especially in the breaking of bread: this Peter Carnley calls the *Christus Praesens*, “seen”—following Rudolf Pesche—with the eyes of faith.

Such interpretations cut loose from a “plain reading” of the gospels, representing a demythologizing tendency; so there is less emphasis on the empty tomb as somehow “proving” that the resurrection occurred. Also, in such views, the resurrection tends to be conflated with the ascension.

Finally, another “spiritual” position, which does not piece apart the text but embraces its paradoxes, is to be found in the school of radical orthodoxy and in the work of Abp. Rowan Williams. This entails a sacramental outlook, which may overflow the ambit of worship and embrace the whole world: so the risen Jesus is really present to many things, effecting a sort of transubstantiation in them.

The first impetus for a more “spiritual” understanding of the resurrection is that the historicity of the empty tomb is inconclusive. For instance, Crossley argues, against the conservative scholar N.T. Wright, that the story of the empty tomb was an invention of Mark’s, which was later taken up and embellished by Luke and Matthew; likewise John depends on one or more of the synoptics for his source material. The clue is given in Mk 16.8, where the narrator says that the women fled from the tomb in disarray, “and they said nothing to anyone¹”. This clause indicates that the empty tomb tradition was neither spoken about nor known among the early Christians, until, of course, Mark’s record. Likewise, 1 Cor 15.4 suggests that Paul did not know of the empty tomb, since he does not mention it. Further, even if the empty tomb is true to history, it proves nothing. The body of Jesus might have been removed by the Jewish authorities, by Joseph of Arimathea, or even by the gardener; perhaps the grieving women went to the wrong tomb². Perhaps Jesus never really died, as Pilate might have thought momentarily (Mk 15.44-45)³. Perhaps Jesus’ followers secretly stole the body by night, as certain Jews said in Mt 28.11-15⁴.

¹ James G Crossley (2005) “Against the Historical Plausibility of the Empty Tomb Story and the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus: A Response to NT Wright” 3.2 *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 171, p. 171

² Dale C Allison (2005) “Explaining the Resurrection: Conflicting Convictions”, 3.2 *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 117, p. 118

³ *ibid* 119

⁴ *ibid*.

The second impetus for a new understanding is the anomalous nature of the resurrection appearances in scripture. Luke and John present physicalistic accounts of the resurrection, and there are certain anomalies in their accounts: Jesus is said to move about in an ethereal manner (Luke 24:31,36) and to pass through walls (John 20:19,26). The disciples, too, are said not to recognize the raised Jesus. Also, Paul in 1 Cor 15.5-8 implies that Cephas, the twelve, 500 disciples and James had witnessed the resurrection in the same manner as Paul himself had, namely, by faith and not by sight.

In general, Paul considers that the heavenly or resurrection body will be imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual; it is to be contrasted with the earthly body, which is perishable, dishonourable, weak and physical (1 Cor 15.42-44).

It is arguable that the appearances in Luke and John are over determined accounts. So Bp. Peter Carnley, in 'The Structure of Resurrection Belief' traces an earlier spiritual resurrection tradition in Mark and Matthew, whereby Jesus appeared "from heaven"⁵. He considers, following John Alsup, that the materialistic depictions were a sort of poetics, which mimicked the OT tradition of anthropomorphic theophanies.

The stories are, then, "verbal ikonostases," behind which lie the transcendent and elusive original experience⁶. So the gospels are not to be conceived of as biographies, but devotional portraits, which point beyond themselves to the reality of Christ in the midst of the community, the *Christus Praesens*⁷.

Carnley further discusses the nature of this encounter with the Risen Christ. In the Spirit consists the "Church's corporate memory" of Jesus⁸, including not episodes in his career, but dispositional data, especially the memory of Jesus' capacity for agape or self-giving⁹.

So the essential memory is that Jesus existed, was a man, showed agape, died on the cross, and that his death exhibits the same quality of self-effacing love that he had exhibited in his lifetime⁹. In worship the disciples both remember Jesus, the earthly Master, and know his presence as risen Lord¹⁰.

This taking off from the empty tomb and the Easter "appearances" is made most explicitly by Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope) in 'Introduction to Christianity'. Therein, he argues that the Emmaus story is programmatic for early Easter faith¹¹.

So the risen Christ is known especially in reflection upon scripture and in the breaking of bread. Christ was immediately raised to definitive life (*zoe*), not governed by biological and chemical laws (*bios*)¹². This Christ is analogous to love itself, dwelling in the interstices between people, binding them and building them up. In this way he is the cosmic lover¹³.

He conceives Christ's resurrection to be a crucial evolutionary "complexification" which steps beyond the merely biological, drawing it to itself: in Christ love is stronger than death; he has revealed himself

⁵ Peter Carnley (1987) *The Structure of Resurrection Belief*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 235

⁶ *ibid* 242

⁷ *ibid* 354

⁸ *ibid* 263-4

⁹ *ibid* 292

¹⁰ *ibid* 298-9

¹¹ Ratzinger, Joseph (1969) [1968] *Introduction to Christianity*, Burns & Oates Ltd, London, p. 235

¹² *ibid* 235

¹³ *ibid* 236

to be the Omega of the evolutionary process¹⁴. One is of course constantly surprised by the debt Joseph Ratzinger owes to Teilhard de Chardin, author of *The Phenomenon of Man* and other works of evolutionary mysticism, whom the Vatican had banned from teaching for his supposed unorthodoxy.

The views of both Carnley and Ratzinger put forward an historical view of the nature of the resurrection by demythologizing or deconstructing the texts. A traditional or orthodox approach, however, does not piece apart the texts, but embraces them as revelatory. One example of this reverential mode of exposition is found in John Chrysostom, who held that the risen Jesus was not essentially corporeal but at times took bodily form for his disciples' sake.

Indeed, it might be said that NT Wright's method is not orthodox since he reconstructs the history somehow lying beneath the ambiguities of the text. He does not describe structures of "meaning." For orthodoxy, as for some conservative and existentialist thought, meaning has an ontological status: what is meaningful for us is in the truth, or unveils it. So even if the facts of history tell against them, structures of meaning (and culture in general) have an independent validity.

It appears from Rowan Williams' study *Resurrection* that the question whether, on the historical plane, Christ rose bodily from the grave is unanswerable. Rather, Williams seeks to show that the empty tomb and appearances were functional parts of Easter faith, even if he is agnostic of their historical truth.

He says that Luke and John depicted the risen Jesus in physical terms because they wished to assert that he had overcome death without attenuation of his earthly personality or mission: so the early Christians would understand the Risen One met in worship to be continuous with the earthly Jesus¹⁵. This, too, was the reason for the empty tomb tradition; the disciples would understand that it was this Jesus, once laid in the tomb, who now addressed them from heaven¹⁶.

Therefore, resurrection faith is more than believing the tomb to have been empty. Rather, it is about experiencing a Christ who is cosmic and also personal: he is a risen and embodied man, really risen in the heavens; the Risen Christ is not a disembodied spirit, an impersonal logos, a projection of the worshipping community, or the Church itself. So, in the end, Williams comes to a conclusion similar to Carnley and Ratzinger.

Like Carnley and Ratzinger, Rowan Williams enlarges upon the encounter with the Risen Christ in psychological terms. To know Christ is to know oneself as forgiven; this is a liberation, "a recovery of the past in hope" and "a return of memory," in which what is potentially threatening, destructive and despair-inducing in the past is transfigured into the ground of hope¹⁷.

Thus, as we penetrate the depths of ourselves, we see that we are grounded in a comprehensive mystery—the eternal Truth to whom all things are present¹⁸. This is the Truth that Christ mediates; in his Spirit we find our vocation¹⁹. Christ's Body is the realm of shared histories and shared gifts, because it is a place of truth and acceptance: so the risen Christ is now and was, for the first Christians, a personalizing mystery.

¹⁴ *ibid* 245

¹⁵ Rowan Williams (1981) *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, London, p.106

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Rowan Williams (1981) *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, London, p.32

¹⁸ *ibid* 27

¹⁹ *ibid* 42

Like Williams, the Radical Orthodox scholar Graham Ward, in his essay "Bodies," refuses to ask historical or experiential questions. Indeed, he tends not to ask questions of truth at all and in this respect is indebted to postmodernism. He is free, then, to investigate the meaningful structure of the text. Therefore, like John Chrysostom, he embraces the paradoxical ethereality and corporeality of the risen Lord and does not explain them away. The disciples' misrecognition of Jesus on the way to Emmaus or Peter's misrecognition in the fishing boat are instructive: "from the hiddenness comes the revelation, the realization which has the structure of an initiation".

This is the realization that Christ's presence is a deep mystery, infusing the fabric of everyday life. In the resurrection, Christ takes not only bodily form, but a multiplicity of forms, or none at all.

Therefore for Ward the risen Christ is not merely the *Christus praesens* of worship, but (one might say) really present "in, with and under" many places and things. As in the text, so also in the world, Jesus is "permeable, transcorporeal and transpositional": in this way the Church, the Body of Christ, "dwells in Christ and in Christ works out its salvation and the salvation of the world". So Christ is risen in a spiritual body and present in material things sacramentally.

In conclusion, Carnley and Ratzinger might once have been called "modernist" for demythologizing and, therefore, seeking truth in history and religious experience. For them the Risen Christ was then and is now the Christ of worship. Such a spiritual understanding of Jesus' body seems to accord with Paul's understanding in 1 Cor 15.

Williams occupies a middle position, remaining reticent as to the historical truth of the empty tomb and appearances, and rather seeking to show how these stories shaped Easter faith in the early church. So truth consists in meanings that are established and tested in experience: historical "truth" is a lesser question.

Graham Ward also cuts away from history, elucidating the "sacramental" and mysterious aspects of resurrection as the text presents it; yet his account arguable suffers for lacking any appeal to truth at all.

In my view, spiritual and sacramental accounts of Jesus' rising are stronger than outright fleshly ones, which must assert, for example, that Jesus rose in the flesh and that he passed through walls (John 20: 19, 26). Such physicalistic views are not supportable on the text, are unreasonable, historically unlikely and do not appeal to resurrection faith as it is experienced.

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