

All Saints Day

Is there really a resurrection of the dead? Is today's gospel lesson just an interesting theory being argued between Jesus and the Sadducees? Or, to get to where the rubber meets the road, is it true that Jesus, the crucified one from Galilee, was actually raised from the dead?

Not that his soul went off to heaven. But that the broken body that was taken down from the cross, that human body, was raised up, made new, somehow the same, but also somehow different? Is it true? Will you stake your life on it?

So ask the blessed dead this day. Indeed, the same questions that beg the asking on Easter are present, front and center today, this All Saints Day. So come along this morning as we ask the questions of Easter; as we come face to face with the Reality that is God.

Skepticism over the resurrection is everywhere. One of our very own Bishops, Bishop Spong, is quoted as saying: "I can't imagine how anyone can expect my daughter, who is getting her PhD in physics, to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus." To which one minister responded, "It's a shame that a woman with so much intelligence is so lacking in imagination."

I think it's safe to say that no one wanted Jesus to rise from the dead. Left in the tomb, we can get back to the business at hand. Back to making money, making love, and making war. A world where Jesus stays in the tomb is a world we can control. A world we know our way around. A world of dog eat dog, sure, but at least we know how to bite!

But resurrection? A risen Jesus? A risen Jesus puts a cork in that life. Listen to this story:

"I am still haunted by a long conversation I had with a man who was a member of one of my early congregations. He told me that one evening, returning from a night of poker with pals, he had a stunning vision of the presence of the Risen Christ. Christ appeared to him, undeniably, vividly. Yet though the event shook him and stirred him deeply; in 10 years he never told anyone about it, until he told me, his pastor. I pressed him on his silence. Was he embarrassed? Was he fearful that others would mock him or fail to believe that this happened to him?"

"No", he explained, "the reason why I told no one is I was too afraid it was true. And if it's true that Jesus is really real, that he had come personally to me, what then? I'd have to change my whole life! I'd have to become some sort of radical or something!" [Willimon, *Undone by Easter*, 40].

Resurrection is a terrible interruption.

Much of our science, our philosophy, our politics, says, in a loud voice, "Everyone knows the dead don't rise!" We say it too, so that, like the man who saw Jesus, we can keep our lives just as they are. It only makes sense.

We are, after all, children of the Enlightenment. We know that the only reality is the reality we can see, taste, touch, smell or feel. Beyond that, there is nothing!

All of which, of course, supports the status quo. The powerful the rich, even the intellectuals who have carved out comfortable spots for themselves in this world reject any notion of resurrection.

For if Jesus rose from the dead, then this world, this life, this reality, is not at all there is. And resurrection becomes something subversive to what we know. Resurrection becomes revolutionary to the existing state of affairs.

So, to keep it away, to undermine its threat to what is, we deny it, we avoid it, we ridicule it. "The disciples stole the body" some say. "They saw a ghost!" say others. "They simply made it up out of their grief and fear." Or, some will concede: "Jesus was raised like we all are when we die, his soul went to heaven."

In first century Israel, there were many claimed Messiahs. None survived the death of the would be Messiah. Except one.

So, what happened? We can know only a little. Jesus' death was horrifically public. He hung on a cross for all to see, in the daylight, to his death.

The resurrection, the moment it occurred, was in the tomb, in the dark. A pile of linens left behind. A private affair between Jesus and God. A private affair, to a point.

They knew it was him, Mary and Peter and the others. They knew it was him; but it wasn't just the old him. He was different as well as being the same. He was transformed in a way they could not exactly describe. And that is what resurrection looks like, for Jesus; and for you and for me as well.

He cooked their breakfast, yet suddenly appeared in locked rooms. He invited Thomas to touch the wounds in his hands and side; yet walked for miles to Emmaus with two disciples who didn't recognize him.

Hard to grasp, isn't it? No wonder we have retreated these last many years to a belief that resurrection simply means the soul going to heaven forever. Somehow, Plato's idea is easier to get our heads around than the reality promised us by the God of Jesus.

Yet this risen, changed Jesus, is the one to focus on. For what happened to him is precisely what God promises will happen to us.

It is the central teaching of the Bible. It is the reason we gather to remember the saints this day.

From Genesis to Revelation, the resounding theme is that creation is good; and that creation will be remade, renewed, and redeemed. Unlike our fundamentalist brothers and sisters, this new creation rests not on the destruction of what is, but on its transformation.

God's good creation will be changed, as we will be changed; yet both it and we will bear the marks of who we are today.

It is not, as so much popular fiction suggests, that God's chosen will be raptured into heaven. It is, as the Scriptures teach, heaven will come to earth, and the two, as bride and groom, will become one. "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Heaven on earth. Heaven, God's Kingdom, in a new and transformed creation. This is the faith of the Church!

Saint Paul says it plainly, "If there's no resurrection, there's no living Christ. And face it - if there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors . . . if there's no resurrection." 1 Cor 15, The Message Trans.

But because resurrection is real, St. Paul says we shall be "fellow workers with God in the new creation." He insists that this present life has value precisely because God will raise our bodies into something new in the transformed creation that is the resurrection. This is the promise of God! This is the hope of the saints who have gone before us! This is the taproot of our faith!

In the Soviet Union, where a beautiful Cathedral had been converted into a meeting hall, a communist official went on for over an hour; telling the assembled crowd how ridiculous the idea of resurrection is. He argued logic, he argued common sense, he argued politics. The people listened quietly.

When he was done, an old priest asked for some time to respond. "You have 5 minutes," the official told him. The old priest thanked him. He climbed to the place where the pulpit once stood; and in a loud voice, proclaimed: "Alleluia, The Lord is Risen!"

To which, the hundreds gathered shouted back, as with one voice, "The Lord is Risen indeed, Alleluia!"

Then, the old priest returned to his place, and quietly sat down.

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