

Empowered by the Resurrection

Third Sunday of Easter, Year A: Psalm 4; Acts 3:12-19; 1 John 3:1-7

Our readings from Acts and I John involve post-resurrection teaching by Peter and by the author of I John, proclaiming the power of belief in Jesus and his resurrection. Our Gospel reading from Luke reflects some of the skepticism about Jesus' bodily resurrection that has surrounded the account of the resurrection from the time of Jesus' post resurrection appearances to the present day.

Palestine in Jesus' day was part of the Roman Empire but the culture of the Empire was largely Greek, and Plato dominated Greek intellectual thought. Jesus spoke Greek along with Aramaic, and the New Testament, written in Greek, almost exclusively quoted from the Greek translation of what we call the Old Testament.

The Greeks believed the soul existed independently from the body and had an immortal existence. For the Greeks, the body was inferior to the soul, something to be escaped from, and certainly not important enough to warrant being resurrected. Thus, Greeks tended to reject the Gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection out of hand.

The Jews, believed there was a life force within each living person but that force did not survive death. The Jews did not believe in the soul in the Greek sense as something that survived death. For Jews until the Exile, death was the end. But some Jews, during or after the Exile developed an understanding there would be a resurrection at the end of time that would rescue the righteous. But this was a controversial belief in Jesus' day, as reflected in the disputes between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And no Jewish groups believed there would be a resurrection before the end of time.

A third widespread folk belief in ancient cultures was fear of the dead returning from the grave as a ghost. In I Samuel 28 there is a story involving King Saul who had what he thought was an encounter with the dead prophet Samuel returning from the grave. In the book of I Chronicles Saul's belief was cited as a reason God rejected Saul.

The first person to write about Jesus' resurrection was Apostle Paul in his letters, beginning about 20 years after Christ's death. Between 20 and 40 years after Paul, the writers of Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John, in their Gospels told about Jesus' resurrection as something quite different from the Jewish idea of resurrection, the Greek idea of the soul, or a dead person returning from the grave. These accounts describe a physical rising back to life in this time and space; a resurrected body that not only is recognizable but that can speak, be touched, and eat.

In our reading from the Gospel of Luke, Luke, who perhaps was a well educated Greek, depicts Jesus as acknowledging the doubts and skepticism about his resurrection and gives a response. First, Luke says Jesus' resurrection occurred before the end of time, so it was not a resurrection of the type the Pharisees expected. Second, he said those present saw Jesus' recognizable body whose crucifixion wounds on his legs and hands could be touched. And third, Jesus ate. So Luke's account does not fit with the Greek belief about the soul, the late Jewish belief about a resurrection at the end of history, or accounts of dead bodies returning from the grave as ghosts.

Our readings from Acts (also written by Luke, probably about 25 years after Paul's letters) and I John reflect Christian teaching about the power of Jesus' resurrection in the early church.

Luke in his Gospel is clear, I would suggest, that the resurrection was a

physical resurrection that had a powerful impact on the first followers of Jesus.

But skepticism has continued throughout history. Our creeds reflect this in that they explicitly reaffirm the bodily resurrection, something that would not have been necessary but for the continuing debates. Certainly the Enlightenment and the growth of science-ism that followed have added fuel to the fire, as did the Reformation which placed great emphasis on believing exactly what the Bible literally says (as read by the reformers).

By the beginning of the 20th century, right belief about the bodily resurrection of Jesus had become for many a defining mark of whether one was a Christian.

Many contemporary theologians, John Dominic Crossen, Marcus Borg and Bishop John Shelby Spong, for example, teach that the resurrection had nothing to do with things that took place in space and time, and everything to do with an invisible reality in which Jesus was and is resurrected and alive in the hearts and minds of his followers. Spong mocks those silly enough to believe in Jesus physical resurrection.

I personally think that what troubles folk the most about Jesus' bodily resurrection is the argument that unique events, such as a resurrection just don't happen. God doesn't mess with the physical world in this way. This is an objection that puzzles me. If I believe in a God who created all things, why couldn't such a God resurrect Jesus from the dead?

In the past 100 years we have learned that science has its limits: that the world is not as neat and tidy as science once thought, and that perhaps there is no absolute objective knowledge even for science. Truth can be found in the arts, in literature, painting, poetry, and in parables and stories both ancient and modern-and, I would suggest, in the New Testament accounts of Jesus' resurrection.

For all my skepticism, I must say that I am inclined to believe in the literal physical resurrection as depicted in Luke. And I believe in the resurrection in the sense of belief as explained by Carol in her Easter homily: I praise; value; hold dear; cherish the bodily resurrection. Jesus' resurrection shapes my life.

But I also have come to think, based on knowing well Christians who accept the bodily resurrection of Jesus and those who do not, that notwithstanding the barrels of ink spilled over debates about the resurrection, whether you or I believe it was an event that happened in history or something that happens in the hearts of women and men, is of no account. What is significant is how we respond to Jesus' resurrection. Does Jesus' resurrection take hold of us and shape our lives? In the words of a contemporary hymn we sing from time to time, are we willing to follow Jesus?

But be warned. Belief in Jesus' resurrection is not an abstract idea. Belief in Jesus' resurrection is commitment to something, being faithful to something, allowing your life to be shaped by something powerful. And belief in Jesus resurrection is not a safe idea. It is unsafe because it changes us: who we are and what we do, just as it changed the followers of Jesus, who moved from fright and alarm, to joy mixed with confusion, to open and understanding minds and hearts willing to risk their social standing, their physical comforts and their very lives by proclaiming the life giving power of the risen Christ and by extending hospitality to the stranger, the sick, the destitute.

Empowered by commitment to the resurrected Jesus, we too will risk social standing, physical comforts, our very lives by proclaiming the life-giving power of the risen Christ and by extending hospitality to the stranger, the sick, the so called illegal aliens in our midst, the mentally ill, the homeless.

When see or hear of suffering, the resurrection will lead us to reach out, to tell the bereaved families in Kenya that we know about their loss and are praying for them; to tell the Christians in Syria we are praying for them; to tell a small Palestinian congregation in Israel that we will stand with them. We will tell a homeless, mentally ill person that we will provide temporary shelter in our garage. And more than offering shelter we will offer hospitality.

Empowered by Christ's resurrection, we will not share in our culture's paranoia about immigrants, terrorism or Muslim fanatics. We will take risks for peace, urging our government to reach out to Cuba and Venezuela , and pushing for a peaceful resolution of our 50 years of grievances with Iran.

In our faith community, believing in the resurrection may lead us to get over our fears and return to the practice of leaving our church unlocked during the day so neighbors and visitors can see the oldest church in town, and perhaps pray a bit.

Like the earliest Christians, our belief in Resurrection will lead us to live the Good News knowing in the depth of our hearts that Jesus has conquered the ultimate threat of death itself and that our fears are nothing in light of the resurrection. Jesus' opening salutation in our gospel reading, "Peace be with you", will fill our hearts and shape our lives.

Amen

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