

**Athanasius**  
**Easter Sunday (A)**  
**(Jn 20:1-9)**

When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to the tomb before sunrise of the first day, and found the stone rolled back and the body of Jesus missing, they were perplexed and immediately brought this news to Peter, who ran to the tomb with John. They entered and found the burial wrappings left behind, and the sudarium that covered his head *rolled up by itself* in a separate place.

They were mystified: these are not the signs of a grave robbery. If someone were to take the body, why would they leave the burial shrouds? Not to mention who would want take the body?

Prior to anyone actually encountering the risen Lord, it was John who first started to “put two and two together” and believe (Jn 20:8). John’s entire Gospel is now given to us as the fruit of his reflection, after many decades, as to why we too should arrive at this moment of the empty tomb, and *believe*. It is an important – essential – aspect of Christian faith that we are able to believe in the Resurrection of Jesus, without having a public proof of it. In other words, that we too come to believe from the inspection of the empty tomb, with its burial wrappings.

Later, in his good time and in his own way, and for his particular purposes, the risen Lord will appear to his followers in order to *confirm* their faith, or fill out their *mission*. This he did for Mary Magdalene, who would be the “apostle to the apostles;” for Peter and the Apostles, who would be the foundation of the Church and its priesthood; and for St. Paul who would be the apostle to the Gentiles. Through the centuries, the risen Lord has continued to appear to select saints within the Church for various reasons, even if not in the foundational way he appeared during the original 40 days following Passover.

But for the most part, the disciples of the Lord will “believe without seeing,” as we hear in the Gospel next week (Jn 20:29). And this is as it should be. Everything Jesus did throughout his public ministry, in fulfillment of the Scriptures, provide his followers all the stepping stones they need to arrive at Easter faith.

During the past several weeks, the Gospel of John has been setting before us some of these great signs – the restoration of eyes to the man “born blind,” and above all, the raising of Lazarus *from the grave*. For those whose faith needs the assistance of “proof,” for skeptics of the world, this is it. The raising of Lazarus is the “public proof” which the Lord provides for his own resurrection. This fully documented publicly witnessed historical miracle illustrates *beyond any doubt* the divine power of Jesus, if not his actual claim to divinity.

The parallels between Lazarus being in an identical tomb to that of Jesus, the rolling away of the great stone (Jn 11:41), and the unwrapping of a corpse from its burial shrouds (Jn 11:44), only a few weeks prior to his own death (Jn 11:54-55), help John at the empty tomb of Christ on Easter Sunday to realize that what happened with Lazarus, has happened with Jesus. It should help us too.

However, there is something very different between Christ's Resurrection, and that of Lazarus. Lazarus "came back" from death, Jesus did not. And this is the reason Jesus could not – would not – provide a public proof of his Resurrection to the world, but appeared only to those who needed the Resurrection for their mission in the Church. Jesus didn't come back to this life and this world from death. Jesus rose to a Life that is new, and not of this world.

Lazarus indeed "came back" to this life and this world, marked by sin and its consequences: darkness, hostility, evil, the dominion of death and the evil one. Lazarus eventually died and was buried, and now awaits from the ground his final resurrection on the last day just like everyone. His "resurrection" was a sign – something in the world, and which the world can see and understand. Lazarus was able to give testimony and lead many people to Christ in the early Church (Jn 12:9-11). As noted, *his miracle* was the great public proof leading people to faith in Christ's resurrection. But Lazarus' resurrection was only a sign, of what will be something completely above and beyond this world and this life.

Christ's Resurrection from the dead is not a "coming back" to life but a "going forward," the beginning of a new Life and a new human existence that is beyond the power and gifts of our present nature. The Resurrection begins the New Creation. It is the first "word" of the first "day" of the final Biblical "week" of creation: Let there be light! The Resurrection begins the "end times," when the old world passes away and the new heavens and earth are fashioned, coming down from above.

In his Resurrection, Christ's body though fully alive and tangible (cf. Resurrection appearances such as Jn 20:27, Lk 24:39-43), is no longer under the dominion of sin and its consequences: darkness, the evil one, death. It is "*Athanasius*," "Deathless." It is also unconstrained by the laws of nature which govern the old (our present) order: laws of space and time, shape and sensory recognition. Jesus now in glory can appear fully recognizable to the human senses (Jn 21:7), unrecognizably (Jn 20:14, Lk 24:15-16), even in the form of *bread and wine* (Lk 24:35). In the Resurrection, human nature is fully glorified, and "spiritualized" (1 Cor 15:42-50).

Thus, Jesus only gives the world an empty tomb. The world will not, *cannot* see him in the Resurrection. Only those will who by the gift of God the Father and the outpouring of His Holy Spirit, following the stepping stones of the Gospels and Scriptural prophecy, come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the divine Son of God. Only those will see and know him Risen.

And they will know the Resurrection of Christ not simply in a human sensory way, but experientially and existentially, incorporated into the very mystery of the Resurrection by Baptism. Through Baptism, the follower of Jesus likewise passes out of the old order of this world, under the dominion of sin and death, and rises to the new life brought about by Christ's death and Resurrection. Christians take the name "Athanasius" (or some other fitting Christian name) to indicate this new reality.

Baptism is truly and in fact the day of our "death." And the day of our rebirth. In Baptism our soul is fully "regenerated," made like the Risen Christ's human soul. Through Baptism we are given access to the Spirit of God (i.e., His "breath" or life), as well as the Eucharist, which is the risen and glorified human flesh of Jesus Christ, fully divinized. A Christian lives already in the New Creation, in the Garden of Paradise being prepared even now by the Lord for the Sabbath of the final day (Jesus wastes no time beginning to prepare the New Eden after his resurrection (Jn 19:41, 20:15).

In conclusion, it is as St. Paul says in that beautiful passage from his letter to the Romans, which serves as the epistle of the Easter Vigil (Rm 6:3-11):

*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our former man was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*