

Why do You Question?
3rd Sunday of Easter (B)
(Acts 3:13-19; Lk 24:35-48)

Two thousand years later, the Resurrection of Jesus continues to be proclaimed to all nations, and millions of people, including we ourselves, have believed. On what basis? The Resurrection is a shocking claim! If today someone discovered in the local cemetery a grave opened and the body missing, and a few days later the family and close friends saying he was alive, without giving us the opportunity to see him for ourselves, would we believe? Highly unlikely.

With regard to Jesus, however, there are several things that come into play with regard to the Resurrection, “stepping stones” to that faith we hold dear as Christians: 1) the empty tomb; 2) the testimony disciples; 3) his miracles; 4) the Scriptures.

The empty tomb. The mystery of the Resurrection begins here: a grave opened, a body missing. If such a thing happened in our city today, it would certainly be news, particularly if the person missing were someone well known. Immediately there would be an investigation. Police, reporters, and citizens alike would be wondering and asking, what happened? *Who took the body?* Where did they take it, and why? The crime scene unit would be looking for any clues or evidence, and all concerned would be interviewed.

We should not doubt that the same happened in the case of Jesus. And the investigation began with the apostles and disciples themselves, who were the first to discover the tomb. We know the details: early Sunday morning, huge stone rolled away, body missing, no one saw anything. And *oddly*, the burial cloths left behind.

Naturally, the assumption of everyone, beginning with the women and apostles, is that “someone took the body.” That is *easy* to assume. But things become *very difficult* when moving to the next questions: Who would have taken the body, and why? And given the horrid condition of the unwashed bloody corpse following crucifixion, why was the burial shroud left behind?¹

¹ Who took the body? How and where did they take it? Why would they take it?

- 1) The stone required 2-3 men to move, guards were posted at the cemetery. How was the body taken, unnoticed?
- 2) Why were the burial cloths left behind, when the body was so bloody?
- 3) Would soldiers/guards take a body, which would get them in trouble?
- 4) Would disciples remove his body and fabricate an elaborate lie which would contradict everything Jesus taught?
- 5) Would disciples sacrifice everything, travel to the ends of the earth, suffer and die for a deception?
- 6) Would Jesus’ enemies take the body, allowing his followers to promote him in a supposed resurrection?
- 7) If some anonymous person took the body, would that cause his followers to “invent” the resurrection?
- 8) Why was the Sanhedrin, which had every reason to find the body, unable to do so?

In the case of Jesus, even though the “crime scene” is no longer preserved in its original condition (though it is still there, within a great church in Jerusalem), there remains to this day *physical evidence* collected from the tomb, that continues to be the subject of actual forensic study: his burial cloths! The burial shroud is kept in the cathedral of Turin, Italy, and the head-cloth is kept in the cathedral of Oviedo, Spain. The shroud in particular – with its miraculous image as well as blood stains – is such a fascinating and mysterious historical artifact that an entire multidisciplinary science of “sindonology” has developed to study it.

The testimony of the disciples. In one of his early public sermons to the people of Jerusalem after the Resurrection (today’s first reading), St. Peter says, “*God raised him from the dead; of this we are witnesses*” (Acts 3:15). Likewise in the last verse of the Gospel Jesus tells his apostles “*You are witnesses of these things*” (Lk 24:48). “Witness” here is understood in a formal sense, the way a witness is called to give testimony under oath. The Gospels, then, (as well as Acts and the various epistles of the New Testament), intentionally set out to record and document *testimonial evidence* from eyewitnesses, as accurately as possible. Christian faith hinges on this testimony.

In the case of the Resurrection, the eyewitnesses are testifying to something they do not understand, or rather something which is beyond understanding and ordinary human experience. It is a mystery. Unlike the raising of Lazarus, for instance, which was a restoration or return to life in this world, the Resurrection of Jesus was a coming alive again to an entirely new order of existence, including but transcending this current one we experience. According to their testimony and experience, when they saw Jesus he was fully human and alive in the flesh: they could see, hear, and physically touch him, examine his wounds, and eat with him. Yet he would come and go mysteriously, “all of a sudden,” appearing in a room without entering the doors. Oftentimes he would appear but not be recognized until he spoke a certain word (such as addressing Mary Magdalene by her name) or performed a certain action (such as breaking the bread at Emmaus).

But the content of the testimony is for believers to ponder and explore... What about those who are not yet believers, the world that is hearing of the “resurrection” for the first time? What are they to make of the *witnesses*? Should we not be somewhat skeptical of people who are claiming to see a dead person?

As with the empty tomb and shroud, there is no scientific “proof” here of resurrection. Jesus ensures that in the end there will need to be faith resulting from a gift and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Christian faith is initiated through this testimony, by these witnesses. Jesus appeared to those who knew him; who had previously been with him and witnessed his miracles and teachings.

What needs to be stressed as we hear their testimony, is the process they each underwent before they saw the risen Lord, and themselves believed the Resurrection. For any who may be skeptical, we can take comfort that the greatest “unbelievers” were initially the disciples themselves.

Mary Magdalene was the first to see him, at the tomb itself. Initially she thought he was a cemetery caretaker, but after recognizing him, embraced him. Naturally, none of the apostles believed her. That evening when he appeared to the group of them, they were incredulous, not believing their eyes and ears. Jesus insisted they touch him, and examine their wounds. He ate a piece of fish, to convince them “you are not seeing a ghost” (Lk 24:37). And as we heard last Sunday, it took yet another appearance to convince Thomas.

Whereas the “easy” explanation for the empty tomb is that “someone [obviously] took the body,” the “easy” explanation for the resurrection appearances is that “they were [obviously] hallucinating,” or “seeing a ghost,” or otherwise experiencing a psychological phenomenon. The multiplicity and diversity of the testimony, however, makes this explanation difficult, impossible.

Furthermore, unlike many religious phenomena which are entirely absurd and fictional like Mohammed’s ascension or Joseph Smith’s “golden tablets,” the Resurrection of Jesus is attested by *multiple* skeptical eye-witnesses, in multiple times and places, who make no pretension to understand what they saw, attesting only to what happened. Again, unlike Islam or Mormonism, the message is not dependent on one individual’s experience or visions. Christian witness accounts are documented historically by *multiple* authors, also at different times and places; those accounts are consistent and coherent with each other, with only minor variations as would be expected; and the testimony has been continuous and unchanged since the beginning. There are no other ancient events so broadly witnessed, retold, and recorded by so many authors, in a way that could be corroborated or contradicted as necessary by contemporaries.

Last but not least, the apostles who proclaimed the Resurrection were impelled to carry that testimony to the ends of the earth. According to it they lived. For it they sacrificed everything, endured hardship, punishments, suffering, and persecution. In the end, all suffered brutal cruelty and death in its defense. None recanted, none changed, none ever attempted to “explain it away.”

St. John Chrysostom (349-407), the eloquent Patriarch of Constantinople, preached famously with regard to the testimony of the apostles:

How then account for the fact that these men, who in Christ’s lifetime did not stand up to the attacks by the Jews, set forth to do battle with the whole world once Christ was dead – if, as you claim, Christ did not rise and speak to them and

rouse their courage? Did they perhaps say to themselves: "What is this? He could not save himself but he will protect us? He did not help himself when he was alive, but now that he is dead he will extend a helping hand to us? In his lifetime he brought no nation under his banner, but by uttering his name we will win over the whole world?" Would it not be wholly irrational even to think such thoughts, much less to act upon them? It is evident, then, that if they had not seen him risen and had proof of his power, they would not have risked so much.

The Miracles. The third stepping stone to faith is the miracles of Jesus, particularly, in this regard, the miracle of the raising of Lazarus from the grave, who had been buried four days.² This was the last public miracle of Jesus, and the one which most immediately foreshadowed his own resurrection. Like many of his miracles, it was publicly witnessed, its details accurately recounted in a way that could be corroborated at the time.

The Scriptures. Finally, there are the Scriptures (i.e., the Old Testament). Both in the Emmaus appearance and in the appearance to the Apostles in the upper room (Lk 24:13-35, 24:36-48), Jesus stresses the prophetic nature of the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and Psalms. He completes the education of his followers in the way he has fulfilled all the prophecies of Scripture, often down to the explicit details. We thus profess in the Creed: "...he was crucified, died, and buried. On the third day he rose again, *in accordance with the Scriptures.*

As the peoples of the world were introduced to the Christian proclamation of the Resurrection of Jesus, they were also introduced to the Scriptures of the Jews, because it was through these prophecies that the life and works of Jesus were explained. By seeing for themselves the correspondence of Jesus of Nazareth to the prophecies of the Messiah, Gentiles (non-Jews) were able to see, better than the Jews themselves, how the Scriptures were fulfilled in him. And once again, the unified witness of the Scriptures comes from a diverse collection of books, written by many different holy men and prophets, writing in very different times and places over many centuries.

Together, these four things (as well as other graces coming directly through God's grace), have helped all mankind to become Christian in response to the preaching of the Gospel. At least, for those who wish to listen and examine the matter for themselves, they provide the stepping stones to an event beyond what

² In writing his Gospel, St. John organizes it around seven miracles of Jesus, carefully chosen and recounted in detail, to highlight incontrovertibly the divinity of Jesus, and prepare the reader for the miracle of the Resurrection. He thus refers to them as "signs." The seventh and culminating miracle is the raising of Lazarus. At the end of his Gospel, he says, "*Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name*" (Jn 20:30-31).

could ever be expected or invented by human imagination or trickery; a mystery of God's own making.

We believe in the Resurrection, not as some fantasy, or wishful thinking. We believe in the Resurrection not by some kind of blind faith or brainwashing. We believe in the Resurrection despite ourselves, and our innate skepticism. We believe in the Resurrection because like Thomas and the other apostles, the Lord goes to the extreme to remove doubt. We believe, even despite ourselves.

It may come through one word as it did for Mary Magdalene; it may come after a long discourse on the Scriptures as it did for Cleophas on the way to Emmaus; it may come in a group context as it did for the apostles; or after a long personal journey of doubt as it did for Thomas. But the Resurrection is there, and continues to be the mysterious and powerful animating reality of the Church.

Those who seek, will find. Thomas believed because he saw him in the flesh. But Jesus blesses those who "though they do not see him, yet believe."