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Living by the Resurrection

There is nothing in life so certain as the fact that we must die. If the Easter message is to help us to come to terms with death, then it must be at least as certain as that fact. But isn't it simply grotesque to accept that this strange report of an ancient story—that the grave of Jesus of Nazareth was empty on the third day and that therefore *we* too will rise from death and decay—has any effect upon the elementary fact of our biological end? What the Psalm says about man being “like the beasts that perish” may sound somewhat drastic; nevertheless it is right, and our experience confirms it. But that Christ carries us through the night of the grave into eternal life—what experience could ever prove such a thing? Would we seriously doubt the certainty of the Pythagorean proposition if somebody told us about a dream he had had in which he had experienced a totally different kind of geometry? Can one (this would, after all, be a parallel question) doubt the certainty and finality of one's own death just because we read in an old chronicle that a few people in an ancient land had a vision that their spiritual leader had come alive again?

To be quite honest about it, we must admit that it is intolerable

for all of us, including us Christians, that our temporal and eternal destiny should be dependent upon such a relative, such a rickety thing as a millenniums-old chronicle and the approval or disapproval of the historians. An absolute such as faith in the Easter victory over death dare not hang by the thin threads of such doubtful relativities.

But the Easter story teaches us that this is not the case. It is interesting to see how Jesus Christ himself deals with the question of resurrection in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

In the parable the rich man sits in the hell of eternal separation from God and thinks about his five flippant brothers who are still walking unsuspecting in the light. He considers how one might administer a salutary shock to them to keep them from heading toward the abyss. He hits upon the idea of asking Abraham to send a messenger from the world beyond to give them a clear warning by giving them a first-hand account of heaven and hell, eternal life and eternal death.

Abraham flatly refuses, however, and makes it clear to the rich man that his brothers have "Moses and the prophets" and that they can learn everything that is necessary from the Word of God without any such spectacular appearance from the world beyond. If they wished to cut themselves off from this Word, then no impression would be made upon them if someone came from the realm of the dead and treated them to eyewitness accounts. What Abraham means is that if anyone is not inwardly touched by the reality which is in question here and if he does not want to be disturbed in "the prime flush of his sins" by any interjections from the beyond, he will surely find reasons enough to argue away such miracles. Then he will perhaps speak of them as spiritualistic delusions.

One could say exactly the same of the disciples on Easter morning: the disciples could never have been persuaded to believe that the dead Jesus had risen from the grave if they had not believed his *Word*. They would have had plenty of other explanations, such as the familiar one that the body of Jesus had been stolen or transported somewhere else by a few of his followers

with the studied purpose of building up a legend. A miracle never yet brought anyone to faith. It can always be explained in some other way. (This is why Jesus refused the challenges to legitimate himself by performing miracles.) So even the empty grave did not bring the disciples to faith. Something quite different happened: in view of the empty grave the scales suddenly fell from their eyes and afterward they realized how many dotted lines in the life of the Saviour pointed to and intersected at this one point where the event of Easter burst upon them. What they experienced on that morning was only the final total of a sum of events, of which, it is true, they had been eyewitnesses, but which they had not really understood at all in the moment when they happened.

Then, after the event, it really dawned on them that when someone says, "Your sins are forgiven," and the person addressed *actually* stands up and walks away a new man, then the only person who could say this must be one who was himself *not* involved in the fatal guilt of all mankind, but was mysteriously beyond it. When someone says, "Young man, I say to you, arise," and the dead man actually rises up and is returned to his grieving mother, then this could only happen if this were a person from whom death, the "last evening," has been forced to retreat. Further, the words "come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden," could only be spoken by someone who himself understood all the weariness and torment and shared it like a brother, but whose life was nevertheless fed by other springs and from whose body flow streams of living water.

All this, which the disciples most assuredly experienced, but which, because their eyes were strangely "holden," they had not yet taken in, suddenly dawned upon them in the light of Easter. The whole life of the wandering Saviour, who had gone through the land healing, helping, forgiving, and bestowing new beginnings, suddenly became transparent to them. It was as if hitherto they had seen the colored windows in the sanctuary of this unique life only from the outside. The panes were dark and the language of the pictures was obscure. But when these people were trans-

ported to the interior of this mystery on Easter morning, the pictures sprang into life and took on sight and speech. That which had seemed gray to them before, the mute, empty meaninglessness of which had plunged them into the panic of Golgotha and caused them to doubt everything, now became for them an eloquent and compelling sign. Suddenly they realized that while he was on earth and they shared his daily life, they had not really known him at all. True, their hearts had burned within them and they dimly felt that they were walking in the shadow of a mighty figure; but not till now did they discover *who* it was that walked with them there. Afterward the light came into his enigmatic words and acts and the heavens opened above the one they thought was only one of themselves, even though the greatest among men—now he turned out to be the “totally Other,” who came from the eternity of the Father and shared for a little while their life on earth.

That’s why the Easter fact will never convince us, if the Man does not convince us. It’s not the empty grave that wins us to faith, nor can any Resurrection account do this. Only this risen Man can do it. When we meet Jesus of Nazareth we realize that here is someone who for love’s sake united his lot with our human lot and keeps faith with us. This is the only reason why the chorale, “When I depart, depart thou not from me,” can have a place in the *St. Matthew Passion*. The person who is gripped by this solidarity with Jesus Christ knows that he does not allow death to come between him and me, but that I am safe with him for all eternity. And here perhaps our experience may be the same as that of the disciples. It may dawn upon us only afterward. Perhaps at first we gather only that here was a man who walked the earth and loved with an absolute love, with no regard for what it cost. This is true, of course, but it is still not the ultimate thing. For then we should have touched only the hem of his garment, but not yet seen his face. And yet it would be a beginning. I have no use for the crass alternative that one must either believe everything at once or remain an unbeliever. Faith, too, is a matter of growth, of small beginnings and ultimate fulfillments. But one

thing is sure: if we begin to read the Gospels very simply as interesting stories about all kinds of human beings (and why shouldn't we?), the day will come when we shall see that this comparison no longer applies and that there are totally different realities behind it all. Only then will we have arrived at the real thing. Then the colored windows will begin to shine and the Prince of life will look straight at us and say: "You shall not die, but live."

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