



Jesus is Risen

by

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Introduction

Some years ago I heard a sermon that really struck me. In exhorting us to "live" our faith, Father asked: "If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Perhaps

you have heard this question before. It's certainly a powerful way to challenge us to reflect on the meaning of our faith.

What does it mean to be a Christian? Some people would say that a Christian is a loving person or a faithful member of a church. Anyone reading the Gospels will conclude that all Christians are called to be loving persons participating in a church community. But we also know that there are many loving people in this world who are not involved with any kind of church; there are also many churchgoers whose lives are not particularly loving. If you were a prosecuting attorney trying suspected Christians, you would probably consider a loving lifestyle and membership in a church to be good indications that a person is a Christian, but inconclusive evidence at best. So, what makes a Christian a Christian?

The most significant and unique characteristic of Christians is belief in the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Living a life of love and belonging to a church are certainly important, but these and other Christian beliefs and practices derive from faith in the Resurrection. Saint Paul even went so far as to say: "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is void of content and your faith is empty too If our hopes in Christ are limited to this life only, we are the most pitiable of men" (1 Corinthians 15:14,19). Without faith in the Resurrection, the Church would crumble.

Examining the Evidence for the Resurrection

I sometimes like to imagine another trial -this one of the Church and the truthfulness of our claim that Jesus has risen from the dead. The prosecuting attorney would, in this case, charge us with perpetrating a fraud that we are leading people astray and causing social unrest. What

kind of case could the attorney make? How would the Church respond? Let's listen as Peter of Galilee takes the stand to answer the questions of the prosecutor.

Prosecutor: Where were you during the morning when Jesus supposedly rose from the dead?

Peter: I was with friends in Jerusalem. We were mourning.

Prosecutor. I see. And did anyone from your group actually witness this marvelous event?

Peter: No. When the women went to the tomb on Sunday morning, the body was already gone.

Prosecutor. Did anyone see this resurrection: soldiers, passersby, rabbis -anyone?

Peter: No one did. But we saw him later when. . .

Prosecutor: Then the only evidence you have that he rose from the dead is the empty tomb?

Peter: There is that, plus the fact that he appeared to us.

Prosecutor. Appeared to whom?

Peter: Well, to the women, and then--

Prosecutor (interrupting): Surely you must know that the testimony of women cannot be accepted in this court!

Peter: He also appeared to a number of men from our group. I myself

have spoken with him.

Prosecutor: Has anyone from outside your group seen him?

Peter: No one that I know of.

Prosecutor: You mean he did not go and show himself to the authorities? Why do you suppose he would refuse to manifest himself to the authorities -especially if he wants us to believe that he has risen?

Peter: I do not know. I suppose he wants to be known through faith.

Prosecutor: Your Honor, I submit to you that there is no evidence that this Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead. What I would suggest is that a sympathizer--maybe Joseph of Arimathea -came by night and stole the body. When the heartsick followers of Jesus found the tomb empty, they remembered that he had promised to rise from the dead and jumped to the conclusion that he had in fact already done so. I submit that Joseph of Arimathea has rather enjoyed all this turmoil over Jesus and the embarrassment it has caused a few of his enemies in the Sanhedrin.

As for the notion that this man has actually been with Jesus: that is his word against ours. Let me just mention, at this point, that it is not at all uncommon for distraught people to actually believe that they make contact with the dead loved ones. Many people in the past and even today still make this claim.

Having rested his case, the prosecuting attorney now takes his seat to observe the testimony of the defense. There is to be no defense attorney questioning Peter, however; he will be his own attorney and

witness. Rising from the witnessing chair, he stands before the entire court and makes his plea.

Peter: People of the court, listen to me. As you all know, Jesus the Nazorean was a man who walked among us, working miracles and great signs while teaching us about God's love and mercy. These things were not done in a dark corner but before all the world to see. In like manner, he was crucified at the hands of the Sanhedrin and the Romans. But God freed him from the shackles of death and raised him up to a new life which no human being has ever known. This Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God; and he is now seated at the right hand of God.

I myself have seen the risen Christ. He came to me when I was near despair and showed me his smile and scars. The empty tomb did not lead me to conclude that he had risen, you see; as I left the tomb, I was in great agony that his enemies were not satisfied with crucifying him but must now defile his corpse as well. It was then that he revealed himself to me, and my soul has since been filled with joy. He later appeared to others from our group; they can all vouch for my message.

As for the state of his new life -I do not understand everything. He comes as he wills, walls do not stop him; but he is capable of consuming food if he wishes to. He is no longer confined to the limitations of our world, but he is still very much a part of it. I believe it is God who is doing this marvelous work through Jesus, and I pray that you may all accept him and the hope he brings us of everlasting life.

Suppose you were a juror at this trial. What would your decision be? Did Peter and his friends really meet the risen Jesus in a special way? Do you believe it is possible for you to meet him? Is the Church guilty

of perpetrating the greatest fraud in history? Or do we proclaim the greatest of all truths?



Encountering the Risen Christ

Nearly 2,000 years have passed since Peter first gave testimony to the Resurrection. He was crucified in A.D. 67 by the Romans for proclaiming his beliefs. With the exception of John, all of the apostles were murdered for the faith. The only conclusion we can draw from their example is that *they believed they had met the risen Jesus. Why else would they have died for him?*

"If," some might say, "Jesus appeared to me like he did to the apostles, I'd believe in him, too." But what about all those Christian martyrs who never experienced Jesus like the apostles did? Why did they believe so strongly? And with that in mind, what kind of an experience of the risen Christ is possible for us today?

There are people today who claim that they have met the risen Jesus in a manner similar to Paul's encounter on the road to Damascus. I do not believe these dramatic experiences are very typical, however. My own experience and the experiences of many others have been that we encounter the risen Christ in ourselves and others as we strive to live lives of love. We also encounter him in prayer, Scripture, worship, sacraments, and in the wonder of creation. The cumulative effect of this array of experiences is a living sense of Jesus working in our lives. Most significantly, he captures our imagination and becomes within us the *self* we seek to reveal to the world. He becomes our meaning and our truth. When we stray from him, we know we are not being true to ourselves; we are miserable. Paradoxically, when we feel close to him,

we are most ourselves. He does not take over our lives, like a demon does a possessed person, but leaves us free, like a true friend, while accompanying us in all that we do.

These are some of the ways we experience the risen Christ working in our lives. Christians through the ages have reported many other wonderful fruits of faith. People who know the risen Jesus so intimately are willing to die for him. But the real problem for many today concerns our arrival at faith in the first place.

Arriving at Faith in the Resurrection

At some time in our lives, we must all sit in the courtroom and listen to Peter (the Church) and the Prosecutor (the world) debate the Resurrection. It is the duty of every human being to take a stand concerning Jesus. As we have seen, there are reasons to believe that he has risen, and there are reasons to doubt. In this scientific age when we demand certainties, no proofs one way or the other will be given. What, then, are our alternatives?

If we decide to stand with the Prosecutor, we will end up rejecting Jesus as the risen Son of God. We might consider him to be a great teacher and a deeply spiritual person (neither of which is an option *he* has given us), but we will not experience any sense of his presence in our lives. Without belief in the Resurrection, we end up rejecting Jesus as the way to the Father and pursue other spiritual paths to meet our needs. Making a decision to take Peter at his word is our other option. Here are a few suggestions for pursuing this path:

• *We read the Scriptures and study the teachings of the Church to understand Jesus and the lives we are invited to live.*



• *We prayerfully ask God to grant us the gift of faith.*

• *We begin to turn away from selfishness while trying to love God, ourselves, and others as Christ has loved.*

• *We become involved in a community of believers.*

There is much more to living the Christian life than the simple suggestions listed above, of course; but those who persevere in these steps will begin to experience the risen Christ in their lives. We all want proof of God's existence before we believe, but what God promises is that if we believe he will reveal himself to us. Jesus said: Anyone who loves me will be true to my word, and my Father will love him; we will come to him and make our dwelling place with him (John 14:23).

Faith and works are inseparable. If we are to experience the risen Christ in our lives, we must live the kind of lives he calls us to live.

Living the Risen Life

"Most people are as happy as they decide to be," wrote Abraham Lincoln. This simple statement expresses the profound truth that our behavior is the consequence of decisions we make. But there is more to it than that, for decisions are ultimately shaped by how we perceive ourselves and the world in which we live and by what we think and feel about our lives. The structure of behavior might be summarized,

then, as follows:

$$\text{Behavior} = \text{Perceptions} + \text{Attitudes} \\ + \text{Feelings} + \text{Decisions}$$

Elaborating on Abraham Lincoln's aphorism, we might say: "Most people are as happy as they think, feel, and decide they want to be."

Many people place the responsibility for happiness outside themselves; they depend on other people and circumstances to make them happy. If others do not meet their expectations, they become angry or disappointed. This kind of attitude leads to selfishness and limits the quality of our experiences. But more and more people today are discovering that it is not so much what happens to us that makes us happy or sad; it is how we interpret what happens to us that is the key to happiness.

For example, did you ever notice how differently people react to the same set of circumstances? In a traffic jam some will curse and show extreme irritation; others will wait patiently, listening to the radio - maybe even enjoying themselves. Clearly, it is not the traffic jam that caused these feelings. Those who are angry may have been ruminating on how late they would be for an important appointment; their *thoughts* about the traffic jam produced their anger. Those who are patient may have thought that there was nothing they could do about it and that being late would not be the end of the world; they did not allow the traffic jam to rob them of peace. *Attitudes are the pivotal factor in determining how happy we shall be in this world.*

In no way am I insinuating that attitudes alone determine human happiness, however. Environment is important, too. Children who are physically and emotionally abused by their parents will probably be

unable to develop healthy attitudes in such turbulent environments. Similarly, people living in chronic poverty and suffering political oppression cannot be expected to develop an attitude like Norman Vincent Peale's. But once people are removed from an oppressive environment, they will need to develop healthy attitudes in order to realize their fullest potential.

If we really believe in the Resurrection of Jesus, our attitudes will change in many dramatic ways. Implied in the Resurrection are several wonderful truths which present us with startling responses to some of life's most basic questions. If we embrace these truths, we begin to see ourselves, other people, the world, and the meaning of life in a new light. Consequently, our feelings about life's meaning begin to change, and we begin to make new kinds of decisions about our behavior. Here we will briefly consider a few critical issues which the Resurrection addresses.



- *Death:* Does death signify the complete termination of the life of an individual? If it does--as many philosophers maintain-- then life is an absurdity and "all things are vanity," as the author of Ecclesiastes rightly observed. But the Resurrection of Jesus reveals to us that death marks the beginning of a new life. ". . . What is sown in the earth is subject to decay, what rises is incorruptible. A natural body is put down and a spiritual body comes up (1

Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, then he who raised Christ from the dead will bring your mortal bodies to life

also, through his Spirit dwelling in you" (Romans 8:11). We are on this earth for such a short time. The Resurrection reminds us that our ultimate destiny is eternal glory with God.

* *Meaning of Life*: The struggle to find a purpose and meaning in life is one of our most unique human characteristics. Various religions and philosophies offer numerous opinions in response to the question of meaning. But who is right? What are the values that lead to the fullest measures of growth, happiness, and social harmony? The Resurrection of Jesus figures significantly here, indicating a special affirmation by God of the life and teachings of Jesus. Because of the Resurrection, we know that the words of Jesus, as preserved by his Church in Scripture, are authoritative in a very special way. In the person and teachings of Jesus, we come to a fuller understanding of the meaning of truth, justice, love, and beauty. Other teachers can help us understand many things about life; but, ultimately, Jesus is our true teacher. Our response to him is one of loving obedience, in which, paradoxically, we discover freedom and meaning.

• *Power*: Christianity calls us to love our enemies, to pray for our persecutors, and to forgive those who have wronged us. These are not natural human tendencies. If we are to love as Christ loved, we will need help. Jesus knew this, so he sent a Helper, to be with you always: the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, since it neither sees him nor recognizes him; but you can recognize him because he remains with you and will be within you (John 14:16-17). The Spirit in our lives joins us to God and gives us the power to live as Christ lived. But it was the death and Resurrection of Jesus which won for us this new life with God. As Jesus told his disciples, ". . . It is much better for you that I go. If I fail to go, the Paraclete will never come to you, whereas if I go, I will send him to you (John 16:7)."

- *Church:* We need each other to live Christian lives. There is a special grace in community that we cannot experience alone. This is because the risen Jesus identified himself with the community of believers. As the Pharisee Saul set out to persecute the Church in Damascus, Jesus confronted him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). In John's Gospel Jesus prays to the Father that all believers may be one with him, I living in them, you living in me --that their unity may be complete ...(John 17:23).

This prayer was answered in the Resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit. Free from the constraints of space and time, Jesus is now completely available to all believers in history. We believers belong to a new spiritual family, and Christ is our Head.

- *Suffering:* Everyone has problems -some of us more so than others. One of our greatest challenges is to stay on top of them rather than allow them to get on top of us. If we are to keep our lives together when we have problems, we will need to learn how to make sense of our pain. Meaningless pain makes us turn in on ourselves and become despondent. Pain borne in love deepens compassion and promotes spiritual growth. We have no greater example of suffering borne in love than Jesus the God-man. Because of his suffering, we know that God understands our sufferings. Furthermore, the Resurrection reveals that suffering borne in love will bring us to new life. As Saint Paul put it, "I consider the sufferings of the present to be as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). Suffering and death do not have the last word in life; God does.

**History:* In this day and age, when pollution, overpopulation, and the threat of nuclear holocaust threaten to tear our planet apart, it is very tempting to think that history is going nowhere. Indeed, there are many philosophers who maintain that life is one gigantic accident. To them, questions about the meaning of history are pointless, for history is merely the product of random, accidental occurrences. But the Resurrection of Jesus reassures us that God is very active in human history. In Jesus, we meet a God who has been intimately involved in history -eating, drinking, sleeping, laughing, crying, and, finally, dying as we do. In his risen glory now, Jesus fully embraces all of history even while transcending it. He is, therefore, capable of influencing the lives of people all over the earth. In the end, his dream for us will prevail. Our resistance to the birthing of God's dream for us in human history has resulted in wars, famines, and all sorts of turmoil. Jesus knew this, and he encouraged us to persevere in love. "Nation will rise against nation, one kingdom against another. There will be famine and pestilence and earthquakes in many places. These are the early stages of the birthpangs False prophets will rise in great numbers to mislead many. Because of the increase of evil, the love of most will grow cold. The man who holds out to the end, however, is the one who will see salvation" (Matthew 24:7-8,11-13).



We do not know how or when God's reign will become fully manifest upon the earth; we only know that his dream will not be denied. By raising Jesus from the dead, God has shown us that evil is empty and impotent. Therefore, we need not fear that history will collapse under the weight of human destructiveness. Jesus, who is now Lord of history, shall eventually move history into harmony with God's vision.

Conclusion

A Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ, committed to loving as he loved in a context of community. At the cutting edge of a Christian's attitude is belief in the Resurrection of Jesus. There are many reasons to believe that Jesus has risen from the dead, and there are many reasons to doubt. Those who believe, however, may look forward to experiencing the risen Christ dwelling within their very souls.

If we really believe in the Resurrection, we begin to take on a new attitude about ourselves and the world. We come to trust that the teachings of Jesus and his Church can help us to live life to the full, and we stand confidently assured of the meaning of life even in the face of suffering, death, and the capricious movements of history. Because of the Resurrection, we know that there is something in all of us that is immortal. This present life is important to us individually and socially, but our final destiny is in eternity with God. Like children waiting to go on a vacation, we realize that "eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Corinthians 2:9)."