

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST

E A S T E R

CHRIST HAS REALLY RISEN FROM THE DEAD

“Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin which had been on His head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple who reached the tomb first also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not know the scripture, that He must rise from the dead” .

(John 20: 6-9)

If there is anything striking about the history of the resurrection of our Lord as described in the Bible, it is that it takes such a long time before the disciples are fully convinced that Jesus has truly risen from the dead. The Word of God is very honest about this. There was no public profession of faith on that first Easter Sunday morning near Jerusalem. Instead of great certainty, there was confusion. Instead of tremendous joy, there were tears.

We read about Mary Magdalene who goes to the tomb early, sees the stone rolled away, and immediately concludes that Jesus' body has been taken by enemies, perhaps dumped somewhere else. She does not even consider the possibility of a resurrection.

We read about Peter and John who rush to the grave, find it empty, and come away puzzled and confused. Perhaps at that point there is the beginning of an idea that Jesus could have risen from the dead, but it is all still vague and undefined.

It is only on the evening of that day that Christ appears to all His disciples – except Thomas – and assures them of His resurrection. Even then there is much uncertainty and an inability to accept what is true. Later He upbraids many of them because of their outright unbelief.

FAITH TAKES TIME

It takes time to come to discerning faith. People can see certain things, but this seeing does not mean understanding or believing. The disciples can see the empty tomb, they can see the risen Lord in person, but they must come to understand all this in the light of the Scriptures. For that alone is the basis on which faith is built. So Christ gradually leads His church to realize and confess that He has truly risen from the dead and to know what this means for Him and for them.

We see in this passage of Scripture how the Lord does this. The disciples are brought to the empty tomb. The evidence in the tomb leads to the initial conclusion that Jesus has risen, but it is only the knowledge of the Word that leads to the certain confession that Jesus has truly risen from the dead.

TWO RUNNERS

It is not hard to understand the consternation which comes over Peter and John when Mary Magdalene comes rushing in with this emotional message, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." This calls for action.

Immediately Peter and John rush out to the grave site to ascertain what can possibly have happened. The passage which we read gives us some interesting details. Both apostles, it says, *ran* to the tomb. But John outruns Peter and reaches the tomb first. Notice, however, that he does not go into the tomb. He stops at the entrance to look in, and he does see "the linen cloths lying there." But he cannot clearly discern what may have happened inside. I presume that the tomb was at least semi-dark, so John had only a limited vision.

He does not go in. The text does not say why he hesitates. We do know that Peter was usually the bravest among the apostles, the one who took the initiative, and when he arrives he indeed enters the tomb. It says in verse 6: “Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. . .”. This encourages John, who follows Peter.

INSIDE THE TOMB

The result of all this is that we now have two apostles inside the tomb. This is an important biblical fact that is sometimes overlooked. Christ has brought these two eye-witnesses through Mary Magdalene’s alarm right into the tomb, so that they may see and report first-hand what has happened. The purpose of this is that all false reports will be repudiated by the evidence found in the tomb. The church will not live by wild stories, but by the results of a careful investigation of the facts.

Notice how the apostle John – and he writes many years after the event – still vividly remembers and carefully registers what they saw in the tomb. He saw “the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but rolled up in a place by itself.”

These are intriguing words. What do they tell us? What conclusions may we draw here? For we understand that the Holy Spirit gives us this elaborate description for a purpose. This is made known to us so that our faith may be strengthened.

In the first place, it is significant that the linen cloths – in which Christ’s body had been dressed – are even present in the tomb. For if some unknown persons – either common thieves or sworn enemies of the Lord – had wanted to steal the body of Christ, they would not first undress the body and leave the linen cloths behind, but would take the body, cloths and all.

This is especially true in the case of the Jews, who could not touch a dead body without becoming unclean. And in any event, why would anyone take the body without the cloths? John and Peter will have been faced with that question.

In the second place, as the Greek text literally says, the linen cloths were *lying*. This word usually indicates an orderly and neat situation. The cloths are obviously not strewn all over the tomb in a reckless and chaotic fashion, which would be the case if someone had ransacked and looted the place. They are lying (and you may add) together, in one place, as if someone had taken ample time and care to arrange them orderly.

We read the same about the napkin, which had covered the face of the deceased. It was not hastily flung aside in a forgotten corner, but was “rolled up in a place by itself.” That even receives some emphasis in the text.

OPEN AND ORDERLY

These are clues as to what happened in the tomb. The place was not ransacked. This was not the work of Roman soldiers, Jewish police, or common thieves. This was not a disturbed grave but a deserted tomb!

No one has *taken* the Lord, as Mary Magdalene had assumed; something different has happened. Whatever is neatly folded or rolled up has served its purpose and is no longer necessary. The linen cloths and the napkin, burial elements necessary for a dead body, are laid aside because the body does not need them anymore. This body has risen from the dead.

We must ask another question, and that is: who laid these cloths down in this fashion? And why, indeed, are the linen cloths lying in one spot while the napkin is at a different spot? That is a detail which cannot escape the attentive reader: the cloths and the napkin should have been lying together as part of one outfit, why are they in separate places? There must be a reason behind this fact.

In my understanding there is only one explanation which really satisfies. There must have been movement in the tomb. And who would have moved there in those early hours, except Jesus Himself? Could it have been anyone but our Lord who folded up these linen cloths, laid them neatly on one spot, and then as He walked on, rolled up the napkin, the head turban, and laid it elsewhere as He progressed? He did away with the burial vestments as He entered into the light of a new day!

Here we are shown how Christ completely does away with death and its attributes. He had been dressed by others for His funeral, but He strips Himself of the shroud of death, and leaves the tomb behind. He puts these cloths down, and majestically He steps out. This is the second great sign of Easter morning. The first was: the tomb is open. The second is: the tomb is in order.

The evidence presents a clear case and is calling out to Peter and John: don't you see it, Jesus has risen from the dead, He has moved on to greater things. This is the new order of Easter: death is conquered on its own terrain.

They never forgot, the two disciples, this scene in the tomb. Years later when John writes about it he sees it all again, the empty tomb, the neatly stacked cloths, the rolled-up napkin, all telling one message: Christ has risen. Instead of the linen cloths, He went to be dressed in a royal robe. Instead of the napkin, He received a golden crown. And instead of the musty tomb, He went on to the glorious throne.

A BEGINNING OF FAITH

The evidence in the tomb is so overwhelming that it leads to an initial conclusion. John says as much in verse 8: then the other disciple (namely, John himself) who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed. Something began to dawn in his mind. Oh, it was only an initial conclusion. They had a long way to go. But it had to start somewhere, and here is where it began, the faith of the church in the resurrected Lord. Faith started in the twilight zone of the musty sepulchre, and soon it broke out into the full sunshine of the new day.

John is quite candid. He writes, “. . .the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in and saw and believed. . .,” and then comes verse 9, “for as yet they did not know the Scripture that He must rise from the dead.”

Peter and John saw the open tomb. But an open grave is still a gaping hole. They face some very clear signs. But these signs must now be understood in the light of the Scriptures. John and Peter are on the way to a better understanding, but they are not yet so far that they can make a full confession that Jesus has truly risen from the dead. They have begun to see but they have not yet reached the stage that they can shout it from the rooftops.

It is a slow process, but it is a learning process. Again we must read carefully what it says in our text. John writes that he saw and believed (verse 8). Literally it says in the original: he began to believe. The wall of scepticism and doubt which John and the others had erected began to crumble. True, it was only a beginning, but it was also a turning point, the first break-through. Someone began to believe. Someone said to himself: could it be true. . . Yes it must be true; Jesus said He would rise. Therefore, He may be alive!

NOT KNOWING YET

John is not yet very vocal about it. He's not about to make a public profession of faith at this point. Later on, as he writes these words, he adds something very significant: verse 9, "for as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise from the dead." It is at first glance almost like an excuse. As if he says: well, that is when I started to believe, but I did not really come right away to the full understanding of what had happened, for, you see, we did not yet know the Scripture that He had to rise.

It is not an excuse. Peter and John and the others had heard Jesus say that on the third day He would rise again. Christ had even beforehand showed them from Scripture that it had to be so. John does not deny that at all. He is saying that they had never really understood this. If I may use an expensive expression, they had not internalized it. They did not really know the what and the why!

Peter and John are faced with some very clear signs. And John recalls that for him personally there was something like a turning point. But he admits: it was only a small beginning for him and Peter. Only the knowledge of the Word would lead them to the full confession: Christ has risen from the dead. From the open tomb, they had to progress to the open Bible.

He says it honestly: they did not know the Scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. They did not know that His resurrection was necessary and inevitable. They did not know that His resurrection was an indispensable part of God's great work of redemption. They did not know that Christ through His resurrection would grant them the righteousness which he had earned for them by His death on the cross. Indeed, they did not know why He had to die, much less why He had to rise from the dead.

THE LIGHT OF THE SCRIPTURES

If they were surprised and filled with awe at that moment, they would be amazed many more times. They would come to understand these signs in the light

of the Scriptures. They would see why He had to die, to rise, to ascend, to fulfill the counsel of God. They would see things which they had never ever seen before. And it would transform their whole lives; it would change their thinking and conduct forever.

The risen Christ would give them that knowledge. He would gather them and open to them the Scriptures, and show them how in the facts of Good Friday and Easter the Word of God was fulfilled. So Jesus would bring them to a deeper understanding and a full confession.

It is, on the one hand, an honest statement of poverty: we did not know the Scriptures. At that moment, John says, as Peter and I walked home, we were filled with many questions, but also with new hope. Something had begun to dawn! But, wow, how little did we know then, compared to later, the time when the Gospel was written. For then John knew the whole story in the light of the entire Scripture.

THE SAME PROCESS TODAY

Here is where we come into the picture. We did not see the evidence in the open tomb, but also, we did not have to go through the process of learning as the disciples. We have received the whole story, the rest of the story, the full revelation. The knowledge of the Word has led us to the confession, based on the testimony of the prophets and the apostles, supported by clear evidence: Christ has risen! Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, has had his own process of learning. All have had their own questions which needed to be answered. Who can say when the turning point came in our lives? There may still be questions that need further resolution.

Our situation is indeed different from that of the disciples. Nevertheless, Christ today still uses essentially the same careful process as He did then: He leads us to the Scriptures, and by His Spirit He enables us to understand and accept the Scriptures. We are born again only by the imperishable seed of the Word of God. When we come to faith, it is because (Psalm 138) God has magnified His Word so holy.

It is quite evident from this text: our faith, the full profession of faith in Christ Who died and rose from the dead, is based on the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit works faith by the preaching of the Gospel. Whoever does not know the Scriptures cannot really know Christ. And whoever still has questions must go to the Scripture, and receive knowledge from God's Word in the communion of the saints. Who refuses to do so will never come to faith, or will destroy what little faith he has.

Many people go to church at Easter. For some it is their once-a-year religious experience. They may marvel at the empty tomb. What a beautiful, inspiring story! But they will never know what it truly and really means for them unless they know the riches of the Scriptures and seek the Word every day.

Do you see how Easter obliges us to search the Scriptures? To dig deeper? To

see the glory of the risen Christ from the Word and so to experience His power? To open our lives to the ministry of the Word, and in this way to come to the full confession? And even then we must continue to seek the Word and to grow in the knowledge of faith.

That is why at baptism we promise to instruct our children and have them instructed in the truth of God's Word. That's the rule of Easter. Otherwise our children cannot come to the rich profession of the apostolic faith. That is why we will give to our children the example of attending church, and of opening our lives to the Scriptures, at home and in the communion of saints. That is why those who despise God's Word and the sacraments and who do not attend church are subject to church discipline. It is the only means to save them, to lead them back to the Lord. All this belongs to the reality of Easter.

LIVING BY THE BIBLE

John admits it honestly: those signs in the tomb were no more than a stimulus. Only Scripture gave the real answers. You see here the true character of the Christian church: it accepts the apostolic testimony – the eye-witness account – and so lives by the Scriptures. The facts are understood in their full scriptural setting and meaning. This is the purpose of all Christian upbringing, preaching, teaching, and catechism. It is that we may come to the full confession: Jesus Christ is our perfect Saviour, our risen Lord, our glorious King; a confession which fills our life with joy, gives us solid direction and eternal hope.

Let us rejoice in all that we have received in the risen Lord! Rejoice that He leads us to profess His Name. Rejoice in His assurances in baptism that we are God's children. Commit yourselves also for the future to a life that is filled by the Spirit with the true Word of God. And pray that

. . . By Thy Spirit guided
Clearly I Thy paths may see
In Thy truth wilt Thou me guide (Psalm 25, *Book of Praise*)