

What does the Resurrection of Jesus Christ Mean to Us?

Having once been just a Seeker of Christian truth, I would like to acknowledge those here today who find it difficult to wrap your heads around the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not an event that lends itself to proof by any stretch of reason; but, it is an event of varying degrees of belief depending on who you talk to. It is the very foundation of Christian belief which finds its foundations in the Christian experience of God's love for humanity, as the hymn we sang on Good Friday said, "... a love so deep, so divine ..." As Christians we crave this divine love. It is a human-defining love. We yearn to experience it in our lives in all we do. This divine love for Christians is consummated in the event of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ which two thousand years later creates for us a new life and new beginnings. In these new beginnings we find the meaning of a resurrected life that is the basis of our Christian hope to love each other as completely as God loves us through Jesus Christ. So, Seekers, hang in there as we embrace and celebrate this unempirical, divine event of God's never-ending gift of new life. God resurrected Jesus that we might know the necessity of death, not live in the darkness of it, but live anew in 'the light of Christ', into the life abundant that God has always provided for us.

According to John's Gospel account of the Resurrection, I found three things significant to our understanding what the Resurrection may mean to us:

The first is the empty tomb, the significance of which John shares with the other canonical Gospels --- which goes to show the significance of the tradition of the empty tomb to the earliest Christian communities.

The second is that Jesus in his risen body relates the same way to his followers as he did before he was crucified.

And, the third significance of John's account is Jesus' insistence that we not hold onto him.

Sociologist Rene Girard has written extensively on the meaning of the empty tomb. Girard purports that tombs are monuments to the conventions and myths of life – the stuff we deem as important and the stories we create about their importance.ⁱ Jesus was anything but conventional and led his earthly life in defiance of false myths perpetuated in the name of God. God through resurrecting Jesus is leading us away from holding up myths we have created that have led us away from God, and he is certainly not leading us to create monuments to them. Jesus was killed by the armed power of the Roman Empire, fueled by the selfish religious interests of the Temple government. The empty tomb removes them from the picture; and removes the myth of thinking we define God with our earthly power and control. The empty tomb replaces our myths of control with the power of God’s death-defying love. With the symbol of the empty tomb the risen Christ lives to continue to help us spread God’s message of eternal and unconditional love for all. I spoke in my last two sermons about the things that get between us and God, and how we must die to them to open ourselves to God’s love through Jesus. With Jesus’ physical death we are given an example of how we must spiritually die to the conventions and myths we have created that are hindrances to receiving new life. We are used to thinking about the resurrection as Jesus having died for us, and having been raised from the dead for us to give us our salvation. This tradition of belief removes any obligation on our part. I don’t think God had this in mind because it has led us to creating the myths of privilege and entitlement that get in the way of being servants to each other that the living God in Jesus Christ demands of us. The monuments of our privilege, those things in life that we take for granted and feel we are entitled to, fly in the face of the sacrifice for each other for which our Christian beliefs call. We do not necessarily have to tear down the monuments we have built, but we certainly should not be exalting them. We should pray to find grace in our service to others who don’t have the privilege that we do. The empty tomb is our Christian monument to letting go of what we have determined life is about and not what God has

ordained through Christ Jesus. The Christian reality is, we can stare at the empty tomb in disbelief as long as we want. Jesus is not there. Jesus did not die for what we want to believe in, but for the love God has been trying to give us from ‘the foundations of the world’ (John 17.24): Jesus has moved on to continue to show us what that love means, and we are invited to move on in God’s love with him.

And, doesn’t it seem in this part of the Gospel that the risen Christ acts very human? As with Luke and Matthew who, also, narrate post-Resurrection appearances, Jesus appears like the Jesus the disciples knew before he died. He talks, he walks, he challenges with questions. I think it was important to John that his early Christian community understand that the risen Christ was as much a part of them as he had been in his human form. (Rowan Williams. *Resurrection*.) Note that the gospeler does not have him first appear to his two right-hand men, but to Mary Magdalen whom I identify as a beloved disciple. So much of women’s roles are not written into the Scripture and we must read between the lines to make sense of the outcomes of actions that happen to them or because of them. I think John’s narration of Mary Magdalen’s obviously close relationship to Jesus indicates John’s regard of her as significant to Jesus’ ministry prior to and after his resurrection. Mary Magdalen’s grief was so great that it was getting in the way of the plans of the continuation of his ministry that Jesus had given to all his disciples. Her participation as the first apostle was so important that God sent messengers to snap her out of her grief. “Why are you weeping?” they ask. Can’t we, also, hear them saying, ‘You of all people knew that his Father would raise him up from the dead’. Mary was grieving so greatly for the loss of her Teacher she was not even able to recognize him when he asked her the same question. There is a hint of intimacy in the meaning of the word ‘to hold’, *aptō*, that probably existed between Jesus and Mary Magdalen. And, hearing about that intimacy allows *us* to create an intimate relationship with the risen Christ. The post-resurrected Jesus is as present with us as he was before his death. The appearance of the risen Christ introduces us and prepares us

for the human and divine nature of Christ. For those of us who have an experiential relationship with Christ Jesus, this is good news. Even when he is ascended to his Father, Abba God, in his glorified form, he is here just as intimately in a relationship of love with us as he was when he walked the earth. It may have been more difficult for us to accept the concept of human and divine in the physical Jesus of Nazareth, but the risen Christ gives us the faith-proof that he always was. Richard Rohr says that ‘Jesus is the eternal Christ whose resurrection focuses our attention on a Presence that has always been available to us. It is the full revelation that God is in love with all of us, and not just our souls.’ⁱⁱ As Christians we count on this love to define ourselves individually, communally and as part of the wider world. And, God counts on us to continue spreading the gospel of our love relationship through who we are and what we do. This brings me to my third point: holding onto the Christ, or rather not holding onto him.

After Mary Magdalen recognized Jesus, she apparently moved to grab hold of him, and Jesus stopped her, saying ‘for in this way I ascend to the Father’. She could no longer touch him as perhaps she once did because his resurrected body was no longer his earthly body. He was prepared to ascend to God the Father. Some assert that when Jesus told Mary not to touch him, he was telling her ‘it is now time to get about the business of doing the work we started when I was in my earthly body.’ⁱⁱⁱ She, apparently understood and carried out her apostolic mission. Jesus’ instructions that she tell the other disciples he was ready to ascend to the Father was a signal to them that it was time for them to be about the gospel-spreading business. They, too, could no longer cling to the form of Jesus they had known. We are not to cling to the risen Jesus, that is, to stay at the altar after we have taken in his body and blood. The flow of our worship feeds us for our energy the food of his body and his divine love to continue his work in the world. Jesus did his part, and continues to feed us, and now, we must do ours.

And, so if the Resurrection is about what Jesus did for us, it, also, is about what we should be doing for God in the name of Jesus. The empty tomb points away from how

we have lived in opposition to God, and points us to our rebirth in a new relationship of complete and utter love with God through the risen Christ. A Christ who demands us to love one another as he continues to love us. The risen Christ demands no less of us than our Rabbouni, our Teacher, and in fact demands more, that we the Church stand in his earthly place. As we take our place, again and again, we are assured of the eternal Christ's intimate presence with us as we spread the good news of new life and of his abiding love. Amen.

ⁱ Paul Nuechterlein & Friends. *Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary, Easter*. http://girardianlectionary.net/year_b/easter-john.htm. World-wide web. 4 April 2015. 2131.

ⁱⁱ Richard Rohr. *Richard Rohr's Meditation: Moving from Jesus to Christ*. "Jesus: The Christ." World-wide web. March 22, 2015. 0221.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Nuechterlein & Friends. *Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary, Easter*. http://girardianlectionary.net/year_b/easter-john.htm.