

Mark 15:43-16:20
I Corinthians 15:3-9
Acts 22:6-11

I'M IMPRESSED

Easter is the most impressive event that has ever happened in human history. But things don't impress all of us in the same way, nor are we impressed by the same things. There are even some among us who would automatically refuse to be impressed by anything that seemed to impress so many others. Strange is human nature.

Maybe the first thing we should do each Easter morning is hold a grand contest to decide who believes in the Resurrection the most: the liberals or the fundamentalists; the Catholics or the Mormons; the businessmen or the professors. Eventually we could get to us and decide which individuals among us really believe in the Resurrection the most. Wouldn't that be a great idea? Sounds pretty "Christian" doesn't it? Have a big contest, rate everybody's faith, kick out all the unfaithful, and shame everybody who doesn't believe correctly. Hey, it builds bigger churches than this one.

But that is not our problem. Today is Easter, and so I will make a proclamation: I do proclaim to you, in the name of Jesus the Christ, that you are loved by the God of all Creation. And that the Christ, who put His life on the line for you, has shown you how much and how deep God's love is. Especially I proclaim to you, in the name of Jesus the Christ, that if you do not yet believe in Him, yet He believes in you. If you do not yet know God, yet God knows and loves you. If you come here with whatever level or dimension of doubt, still you are welcome here. And though you may not believe it yet, God wants you in eternal life, and it is the power and love of God that will keep offering it to you – no matter what you think, and no matter how much or how little you deserve it.

I know that you have and will run into many teachers and preachers who tell you differently, who put all kinds of threats and restrictions on this Gospel. And yes, they tell me that I'm going to Hell also, because they say I don't believe it properly either. But that's okay, I don't believe them. I believe in Jesus, who came to those who didn't believe it properly, and made a way for us too. So don't trust anyone who tries to lock the Message back up into their tiny frames of who God loves, and on which conditions of behavior or belief. What we believe

does free us to participate and cooperate more consciously. But what we believe does *not* change the heart of God. Jesus' coming here, and His teaching and healing and life here, proclaim God's love for us. The Cross and the Resurrection are about *how much* God loves us. That does not go away because of anything we do or don't do, or believe or don't believe.

Believe in gratitude and joy, as much and as fast as you authentically can. But do not be threatened by haste or by Hell. God wants us to believe and to know him truly. Yet such things cannot be coerced and still remain true. "Truth, like love and sleep, resents approaches that are too intense." God will give you all the time you need – in this world, or the next. No fires are waiting to burn you more than those which already have. The fires of remorse and sorrow and loneliness and fear that have burned us in the past will also burn us in the future, until we find our God. But that is not some religious creed; that is just our reality for as long as we are alienated – estranged from God, from ourselves, from each other.

So we try to trust God's love. If we get confused or perplexed by the words or the systems or even the way somebody uses the Bible, we keep remembering that Jesus came, how He died, and that witnesses for two thousand years claim they know His living presence. If words get confusing, we watch the actions of God – especially with Jesus – and we include what we ourselves experience in our own lives.

So let's talk about Easter. The first thing we need to do is take away certainty about the details. I know that sounds strange at first; so many people are trying to know everything down to the last detail. But Easter is not a scientific convention. No video recorders were running. Easter is a faith affair, not a scientific experiment. It is important to know and to admit that we do not know the details with any certainty. Easter is mystery – *mysterium*. If you can explain it all, you flunk! (This is not to suggest that you go to Hell; it's just me saying that if you come here with no doubts, you do not understand the situation.)

As soon as we get technical, we get into trouble. On the other hand, we are physical beings, so we are always getting technical. Whether or not we agree with each other – whether or not we even discuss it – each one of us has a technical image in our head when we think about the Resurrection of Jesus. Is it a physical resurrection, a spiritual resurrection, or some combination? Once on that level, we start arguing, and often we intersperse the arguments with phrases like, "Well then, you just don't really believe ..."

I do not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus. But the moment I make such a statement, we are into word games. We got technical. The word “physical” to me (and to the dictionary, for that matter) refers to the body – to the body as I experience and know it, as all of us have always known it. The physical is imperfect: it wears out, it gets sick, it gets old, it dies. If you say to me “physical,” that is what I think. That is what that word *means* to me. Everything I have ever known that was physical was in decline – wearing down, wearing out – from mountain peak to my big toe. I do not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus. Obviously for me that would be horrible – pathetic, trivial, ridiculous. Easter has got to be bigger than “physical” or I would have no interest in it. I would conclude we were talking about resuscitation instead of resurrection.

I understand a little about the mind-set of apocalypticism in the century before Jesus, and I know there have been threads of our tradition that perceived and expected everything to be physically based. New Jerusalem would be the actual city of Jerusalem made perfect, right here on earth. Resurrected bodies would be our physical bodies made perfect, dwelling here on a perfected earth. That is at least some improvement. Then we have more than a physical resurrection; at least our physical nature is transformed, so that we are super-physical. We could at least say, “I believe in the super-physical resurrection of Jesus.” But I do not believe that picture either. It is much too small and limited. The implications (no sun or moon) are that God will “freeze” the earth in some perfect state, and that those who make it – who “earn” the transformation – will spend eternity on this earth, only without pain, decay, aging, etc. Does that get you all excited? I am not impressed. I am not even interested.

According to this tradition, those who die stay in their graves until the day of resurrection, then everybody comes out at the same time. Of course! There isn't room here for both shows to go on at the same time, so the dead have to wait for the living – for the present mess to run its course – and then when this phase is all finished, we can change the stage setting a little and bring on the eternity phase. Act V, Scene Two Billion. Boring! I am not impressed with the merely physical. Haven't been since about sixth grade. I realize that some people who speak of the physical resurrection of Jesus mean it as a compliment, as something more real or grand in their eyes. Not for me. That makes it small, petty, foolish – for me. It is not worth the effort.

Some people, however, are impressed with the physical. If it is not physical, they think it is not real. People whose minds work like that *do* believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus. Usually they don't mean what I mean by physical. That is, they think of a body not limited by time and space, or disease and aging. They think the resurrected body of Jesus will not die. So they think it's some kind of spiritually transformed physical body, which is actually pretty close to what I mean when I say I do not believe in the physical resurrection because that is too limited. (So sometimes we mean the same thing, at least sort of, but argue like we hate each other because we don't use identical words.)

Do you believe in the resurrection of only the spirit? For me, it depends on what you mean by "spirit." Lots of my New Age and liberal Christian friends mean a sort of gaseous vapor, like Casper the Friendly Ghost or the cohort of Mrs. Muir. I am even less impressed with that than I am with a reworked physical body. Even now I hate it when things slip through my fingers. If you're going to saddle me through all eternity with a form that can never get a grasp on things, I'm not going to be real grateful. I think God personally invented hugs, and I don't think Heaven can run right without them. Besides, Heaven is more, not less.

Paul's phrase is "spiritual body." What is a spiritual body (besides being a contradiction in terms)? What is a spiritual body capable of? I have no notion. I have never touched one, certainly never used one. I expect to get to do that some day. Suddenly the technicalities are absurd, and science is silent simply because no one with a spiritual body has ever turned it over for scientific investigation. A spiritual body, for sheer lack of definition, is whatever we imagine it to be. Maybe it has substance, if it wishes, but not substance as we know it. Jesus appears and vanishes. "*Later he appeared in a different form.*" (Mark 16:12) Sometimes people don't recognize Him, except in the breaking of bread – that is, in the communion meal. (Luke 24:31,35) Even Mary of Magdala doesn't recognize Him at first, and if anybody in the world would, she would. (John 20:14) When Jesus appears to the disciples, they think He is a ghost, a spirit. (Luke 24:37) It is not a "body," at least not like anything we know or think of as a body.

Okay, so Easter is *mysterium*. Technicalities do not help us. In fact, they only confuse the issue. What we do know is that some people had experience with the Living Christ which convinced them that He was alive. Nobody – NOBODY – EVER BELIEVED BECAUSE SOMEBODY *ELSE* SAW HIM.

Track it with me:

- Mary Magdalene was the first to see Jesus. She told the disciples, but *“they would not believe it.”* (Mark 16:9-11)
- Two disciples encountered Jesus on a country road. They went back and told the others, *“but again, no one believed them.”* (Mark 16:12-13)
- The women from Galilee returned from the tomb and told the eleven disciples, *“but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”* (Luke 24:1-12)
- The whole Gospel of John is about people not believing, including the story of Thomas, whom we have nicknamed “Doubting Thomas.” The other disciples told him, *“We have seen the Lord.”* But Thomas refused to believe until he saw and touched for himself. (John 20:24-28)

It was not just Thomas, you see. They were *all* like that. They had walked and worked with Jesus, and Jesus had told them what to expect – had told them that He would rise from the dead, and told them to be ready for it. And still they would not believe each other when it happened. NOBODY BELIEVED BECAUSE SOMEBODY *ELSE* SAW HIM.

But *you* are supposed to believe because somebody else saw Him? His own disciples wouldn't believe until they themselves saw Him – wouldn't even believe each other – but *you* are supposed to believe because I or they or somebody else tells you? *That* is His plan? That is what Jesus was counting on? He would appear physically to a few folks for a few weeks, and they would tell everybody else, and it would work? All over the world, all through the ages? Until now, when *your* faith is supposed to depend on somebody telling somebody down through the generations for two thousand years? You believe on the basis of an eyewitness two thousand years in the past?! No wonder we have a society in which thousands can believe in the Resurrection but it doesn't make any difference to them. They are just as depressed, afraid, and self-centered as before. We can believe in the Resurrection but it doesn't cut our greed, or interfere with our adultery or idolatry? It doesn't bring the joy that transforms, or put us into living churches that demonstrate the WAY of Life that knows Christ's Kingdom is real?

You understand, I presume, why fundamentalists are so adamant about the Bible being inerrant. Since their faith depends on the absolute accuracy of the record that tells about Jesus' appearances, any hint that the record might have flaws of any kind is terribly threatening. Easter is *because* the Bible says it is, *and the way* the Bible says it is. Therefore, they try to make it sound like it has precision, that the technicalities are all in place, and that no "good" person can doubt that it happened just as it is portrayed.

Except that Matthew is sure the disciples saw the Risen Lord for the first time in Galilee, while Luke thinks it happened in Jerusalem. They cannot even tell the difference between one end of the nation and the other, but I'm forbidden from wondering if they got all the other details right, like *what happened to the body?*

That's the wrong Easter! Easter is about a LIVING LORD – and you don't have to be petrified for fear some ancient record isn't perfect, not if you believe in a *Living* Lord. If Luke got confused, so what? For all we know, he had never been to Israel and didn't know the difference between Galilee and Judah. Or in this case, it's more likely that Matthew failed to read Mark's Gospel carefully. Do you think that actually matters if our Risen Lord is really RISEN? If Jesus is alive, the Bible is precious for whatever information we can get from it, but Easter does not stand or fall because somebody saw Him two thousand years ago. The truth is, we believe just like they did – that is, we believe when we *encounter* the Risen Christ ourselves. Just like them, we do not believe it until after *we* encounter the Risen Christ. We may long to; we may be very eager as we hear the witnesses, and feel the soul stirring within us. But it takes true encounter before we truly believe – the kind of belief that changes our lives: our values, our goals and how we try to reach them, why we are alive, what we live for, what we care about, where our hope lies.

Paul lists the appearances of Jesus (I Corinthians 15:3-8). Paul doesn't know anything about an empty tomb. What he does know is that he has personally encountered the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road. And Paul knows that every other apostle (messenger) has had some kind of encounter with the Risen Christ as well (verse 7).

Now I'm impressed! Now we are talking about a Risen Christ who is really here with us – who is at work among us – and who keeps on coming to us, encountering us, changing us, sending us. The Resurrection

is about our encountering Him as others have ... and about our living life with Him too.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus did not appear to Pilate? Or to the Chief Priest, or to the Sanhedrin? That would have been appropriate, don't you think? "Hey fellas, remember me?" (I would have liked that scene. That's just about my style, which is one of the big differences between me and Jesus. But don't sidetrack me.) What about Jesus appearing to Caesar? Why not settle it once and for all, if that really is the purpose – if we are going to do this Resurrection thing in some overt way that nobody can ever doubt, ever again. Why doesn't Jesus just walk in on Caesar and make it *really* clear, to the whole world? "Hey bud, move over, I'm back." (Jesus as Rambo.) It would have saved the lives of a lot of His very dear friends too.

But that is not like Jesus, is it? It is not like our God to do it that way. That is how we keep wanting them to be, how we keep wanting to make it sound, but that is not how they operate. They offer, make it possible, invite, encourage, come to share and influence – just as much as we are comfortable with, just as much as we will allow it. But no shoving, no coercion, no breaking the Prime Directive (the decision of God never to do anything that would destroy our free will). A Book with no errors would be like the Resurrected Jesus walking in on Caesar: it closes down the options, takes away the learning and growing on our part, turns from faith to fact – and in the process, cuts out love and life and meaning. That is how to get automatons, not living, growing souls. Why do we try so hard to make the Resurrection fact and certainty, when God and Jesus work so hard to keep it faith and prayer?

If we want Easter, we can only find it like the early disciples did – in our own personal encounter with the Living Christ. "Oh no," you say, "don't tell me we have to go back to life as usual." If by "life as usual" you mean prayer, turning it over, walking day by day, trading in our control and our purposes for Christ's unseen Kingdom – doing it in faith (uncertainty), making mistakes, getting forgiven, feeling the mercy and grace and guidance and presence of the Risen Christ ourselves – in our own lives – then yes! Then Yes! THEN ... YES! He is risen! [He is risen, indeed!] And He did not go back up to Heaven in some way that leaves us waiting for Him. He is risen and here! [He is risen, indeed!] And Easter IS the Second Coming. So He is really risen! [He is risen, indeed!] And we have life with Him here, and now ... and forever. Amen.