

Jesus' resurrection – an inconvenient truth

3rd Sunday in Easter 2012

Acts 3:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8; Luke 24:33-49

I don't know about you but I find God inscrutable at times. I mean, who can work out why God works the way he does? This is nowhere more true, perhaps, than in the resurrection of Jesus. The sheer improbability of it is only exceeded by the insistence on it by the New Testament writers, and the wonderful implications it has for everything else – our lives together, the life of our planet, the truth and meaning of it all.

A friend of mine, hilariously, calls the resurrection of Jesus the “cosmic pelvis of history”. By this he means that from it a whole new world is birthed – a world which, though apprehended through faith, is created through a *singular event* in space and time.

Can this really be so? Can the resurrection, as improbable as it seems, have happened? Can the Gospel testimony be trusted? And can such an event, specific to such a far off time and place, have not just universal meaning, but transformative power for us today?

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Today's Gospel reading narrates Jesus' third resurrection appearance in Luke's account. It comes at the end of the third day and is set straight after the “walk from Emmaus”, which culminated in Jesus revealing himself in the breaking of the bread. The story reinforces the theme common to each episode – that Jesus' death and resurrection is a startling fact, that it was part of God's purposes and that it changes everything.

Until this point in the narrative, the disciples as a group, despondent, apprehensive and huddled for safety behind closed doors, had only *heard* the “good news” that Jesus was alive.¹ Now they were to *encounter* the risen Jesus for themselves, even while they talked about it.

It is significant that Luke begins this third appearance with Jesus coming to the disciples where he “stood among them”. That is, he is standing, not lying down – he is alive. And immediately he gives the disciples a blessing of peace – “*shalom* (peace) be with you” – a conventional Jewish greeting, here given

greater import by Luke, partly because we know it is the now resurrected Jesus saying it and partly because throughout his Gospel and in the book of Acts, Luke uses *shalom* as a sign of the Kingdom.²

After the elusiveness of Jesus' presence in the Emmaus walk, there is an emphasis here that Jesus was not a ghost or spirit or some sort of invisible man, or even a transfigured man – as, for instance, he is earlier pictured by Luke when he met with his ancestors upon the mountain. No: here Jesus is presented as a resurrected person. So we see him conversing and eating fish, and there is, again, a part of the story where Jesus encourages the disciples to touch him.

Luke doesn't focus on Thomas as the doubter,³ but rather, he describes *all* the disciples as *initially* startled and terrified,⁴ and *then*, full of joy⁵ – both Mark and Matthew also record similar responses of terror from the disciples.

Luke writes, “While in their *joy*, they were *disbelieving* and still *wondering*” – that is, they were still trying to get a handle on what was happening (a kind of beginning of “faith seeking understanding”, as Anselm would put it).⁶

Jesus responds with an almost casual enquiry, “why are you frightened and why do doubts arise in your hearts?”⁷ He invites the disciples to simply let go and believe their *senses* – to believe what they can see and touch, to look at his hands and sides.

All the Gospels are adamant about this. The resurrection is presented as a simple fact, a fact around which all perceptions need to be configured. It is not something which has to be made sense of in terms of what we *already* know, or think we know, such as a delusion or apparition.⁸ It is an event which calls into question everything else. The resurrection is, as it were, the organising principle around which all other knowledge is interrogated.

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This is remarkable. The disciples and early evangelists such as Luke, were as concerned as we are about the physical.⁹ We know from Paul's writings that as early as AD 51 or 52¹⁰ there was a form of incipient gnosticism¹¹ floating about that tended to degrade the body, treating it as unimportant or something lesser than the “spiritual”. Later this would become standard in the so called

‘gnostic gospels’ – such as the Gospel of Thomas or (if we are to believe the National Geographic’s hype), the recently published Gospel of Judas.¹²

It must have been tempting for the early church, as the years went by, to opt for such a spiritualised gospel given the delay in Jesus’ turning up and the terrible persecutions Christians suffered. But they didn’t.

Why is this?

Their insistence upon Jesus’ physical resurrection can only point to their conviction that the story handed down by the early witnesses was *true* and so couldn’t be conveniently “spiritualised” to cope with testing times of unbelief.¹³ The Gospel was an inconvenient truth, to use the phrase, that had to be reckoned with.

Moreover, their concern lay in a more significant direction – again, a direction determined by the course of *events*, not their speculation or personal preference.

In a bible study I attended some years ago, Raymond Pelly¹⁴ made the point that “the New Testament is not interested in the question of the “immortality of the soul”, [nor, for that matter, “religion” in a general sense], but the resurrection of the body. The key question for the witnesses to the resurrection was rather: ‘who is this person who is speaking with me now? Who is acting? Who is present before me?’ ” Jesus answers these questions directly: “It is I myself. Touch me and see... have you anything here to eat?”¹⁵ So Jesus made himself known to the disciples in a real and *tangible* way.

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Luke’s narrative also shows us how the living Jesus will continue to make himself known, how he will continue to be present to the community of believers: at fellowship meals where they break the bread as he taught them; by his Spirit as they wait for him; as they read the scriptures together that speak of him; and as his people remember his words and actions.

“Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations...'"¹⁶

It is instructive to note from these verses and many like them, that the faith of early believers, Gentile as well as Jew, was grounded in the Hebrew scriptures which they *re-read*, at every turn, as *prophecy fulfilled* in the events of Jesus' life.

Luke's account of the resurrection of Jesus is undoubtedly influenced by Paul (with whom he may well have been staying while he wrote his Gospel during Paul's first imprisonment¹⁷ in Rome).¹⁸

Bible scholar Richard Hayes has made much of Paul's "*re-imagining*" of the Hebrew scriptures in the light of Jesus' resurrection,¹⁹ and how deeply this influenced the Church's understanding of "the events that were fulfilled among" them.²⁰

Have you ever wondered what Paul was doing those fourteen years he spent in Arabia and Syria after his conversion?²¹ We know he had further "revelations",²² but what was these about?

It seems to me Paul was trying to make sense of an experience which had blown all fuses. Yet, as we read in Galatians,²³ the central organising fact in this reworking was *not his experience* per se, though clearly he made much of this, but a revelation of the *resurrected* Jesus, available now to all who would turn to him in trust.²⁴

For Paul, the "exteriority" of Jesus' resurrection, that is to say, the reality of the resurrection outside / independently²⁵ of his experience of it, was both foundational and transformative of how he understood the Jewish scripture in which he was steeped.²⁶ His whole corpus of writing is shot through with echoes and allusions to Biblical writings which he understood to be *prophecy fulfilled* in Christ. "According to the scriptures... according to the scriptures... according to the scriptures..." is not an attempt to prove the resurrection a fulfilment of a kind of Nostradamus like prophecy. Rather, it is Paul and the early church shouting, "Eureka! It was there in the scripture all the time! God always intended it to be so!" From this new, unexpected perspective that the

resurrection event drove them to, everything is seen anew and everything has to be re-evaluated.

Today, many find these scriptures an embarrassment – a collection of borrowed myths, full of violence, patriarchy, homophobia, and rationalisations for domination not only of peoples but the very earth itself.

Yet for Paul and the early church he so tenaciously nurtured, the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms were foundational. Why? *Because radically re-read in the light of Jesus' suffering and resurrection* (“the events”), they pointed to a God determined not to give up on his world, a God desperately concerned to give Life – with a capital L – to a dying humanity and disfigured creation; they witnessed to a God who remained faithful to promises of redemption, liberation, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation to *all* nations²⁷ – all of which Luke calls in our Gospel today the *shalom* of the Kingdom.²⁸

In birthing such a world, Jesus the faithful one, chose to work through human sin – the disgrace and pain, the treachery and sorrow of the cross. But in choosing such a path, he was simply incarnating what Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God of scripture, had always done.

The scriptures that Jesus opened to the disciples in order to give meaning to his life, suffering and resurrection, were not a moralistic system of burdensome rules as Judaism supposed,²⁹ (a Hebrew *shariah*, as it were), but rather, a testimony to a God that never gives up on us, of how God's purposes were worked within the creation through the raw material to hand – the messy, complex ambiguities of human affairs in a broken world.

Jesus' resurrection, as *unexpected* as it was, was the vindication that God could be *trusted* to transform such a world, to bring life from death – concretely. A spiritualised, symbolic gospel in the face of the enormity of evil would not do – and the disciples understood this. That is why they were filled with joy, even in their “disbelieving and wondering” at the unexpected turn of events; they knew... they knew that against the odds it truly *was* the Jesus *resurrected* who stood before them, and that from now on everything was different...

¹ v.35.

² Lk.1:79; 2:14,29; 7:50; 8:48; 19:38,42; Acts 10:36.

³ NB: John notes that Jesus' encounter with Thomas took place a week later.

⁴ v.37.

⁵ v.47.

⁶ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proslogion>

⁷ v.39.

⁸ v.37.

⁹ See NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, Harper Collins, 2008. Ch3 & 4.

¹⁰ The false teachings of the "Judaizers" opposed in some of the New Testament books bear similarities to the Gnosticism combatted in the second century and have been called "incipient Gnosticism" if not outright Gnosticism. Undoubtedly, in the very early Christian period there were Stoic and Cynic philosophical influences, popular sophistic rhetoric and charismatic fervour (all aspects of popular Hellenistic religion), also in this mix. The probable date of Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he tackles such issues, is around AD51-52, though this is disputed. (See *New Expositors Bible Commentary*, Zondervan; Abridged edition 2004. Introduction to Galatians). Colossians and Corinthians (and possibly Ephesians), written maybe a decade or so later also seek to combat similar errors.

¹¹ A form of religion that denigrates the physical exalting personal knowledge (gnosis) and practices as the way to enlightenment. See <http://carm.org/gnosticism> for a simple introduction.

¹² <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2006/05/judas-gospel/cockburn-text.html>

¹³ 1.Cor.15:1-4.

¹⁴ Rev. Dr. Raymond Pelly, former Dean of St. John's theological College, Auckland, then (2006) Theologian in Residence at Wellington cathedral.

¹⁵ v.39, 41.

¹⁶ v.35, 44-47.

¹⁷ More like a house arrest.

¹⁸ Circa AD60 / 62. This dating, of course, though very plausible, is much disputed. The fact remains that "Luke" (the writer of the Gospel of the same name and of Acts), undoubtedly knew Paul well.

¹⁹ See Richard Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture*, Eerdmans, 2005.

²⁰ Lk.1:1b "...the events that have been fulfilled among us".

²¹ Gal. 1:13-2:10.

²² Gal.1:11-17.

²³ Gal.1:12 & 2:20 c.f. Acts 9:3-5, Rom.16:25-26, 1Pt.1:20-21.

²⁴ Gal.2:15.

²⁵ That is, the "ontology" of the resurrection.

²⁶ 1.Cor.15:3-6, 12-20.

²⁷ v.47.

²⁸ v.36b.

²⁹ Jn.5:39-40; Mtt.18:6-7.