

**Sunday, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, Second Sunday in Easter**

**Readings: Acts 5:27-42, Psalm 150, Revelation 1:4-8, John 20:19-31**

## **Seeing Reality Differently**

### **Introduction**

*Resurrection...what a headache!* Of all Christian beliefs this has been the most difficult, the most confusing, and the most intractable; the major theme for the season of Easter, and a recurrent fundamental theme for faith: *and we are stuck with it*. One of my Iranian, friends studying engineering at Newcastle University, put it well to me: “I can’t believe Christianity because it moves at the level of myth and fantasy; especially with Christ’s resurrection”. The issue of my Iranian friend is the issue of us all, for we are all children of the Enlightenment, offspring of unlikely looking radical gentlemen philosophers like this – the German, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and the Scot, David Hume (see the photos of the august white gentlemen below). It was Lessing who argued that the miracles of the New Testament “are no more than reports of miracles”, and Hume who sceptically suggested that Christianity cannot be believed *without* miracles, in other words can’t be believed at all.

Not unlike Lessing and Hume, we moderns also insist upon thinking for ourselves: we sift-out truth, we are disbelieving of external institutional authority. In short we are people who critically draw conclusions on the basis of what we observe, on empirical foundations. So, returning to the resurrection; if I do not see men and women being resurrected from death in the here and now, why would I believe in the reported resurrection of Jesus 2000 years ago? A problem, no?

So what do we do with the Christian belief about Jesus’ resurrection? We can’t verify it historically; it sits awkwardly with modern human experience which we increasingly interpret through empirical evidence grounded in laboratories and statistics; and as a doctrine, resurrection has taken on this flavour of ‘truth imposed’, truth associated with religious dogma, not truth freely, independently discovered.

### **Some Chewing, Munching**

Well I want to debunk Lessing and Hume – I think they are both wrong. It is true that we cannot ultimately prove Jesus’ resurrection, or indeed the resurrection of any-one to life *after* death: after all we don’t generally come back to tell the tale. *But* I contend that resurrection is something that we *do in fact* observe in the lives of others and in our own lives; resurrection *is* connected to reality, resurrection happens *in* the real world! In fact, it is only because of these resurrection-al experiences *in* the here and now that confirm things like love *over* hatred, justice *over* injustice – in other words life *over death in this life* that we can even begin to extrapolate, to contemplate, to entertain, to imagine the possibility of life *after* death. In saying that, let us remember the root meaning of resurrection...rebellion, uprising. Resurrection is about overturning what is for what may be; resurrection has a utopian dimension; it is about ridding ourselves of *all forms of death* in favour of life.

In order to make the point, let's for a moment turn to the story of the German-French-Swiss film, *The Chorus* (*Les Choristes*, Vega Film 2004), and then the Central American Christian Creed (*El Credo*) from the Nicaraguan Peasant Mass (*Misa Campesina Nicaragüense*, 1975) by Carlos Mejía Godoy! Then and only then, with new eyes to see, we will turn to the Gospel reading and understand it a new way.

In the story of the boys at the reform school, we see victims of a 'living death' They already come from brutal backgrounds and find themselves in an equally brutal institution of 'reform', a euphemism for unjust punishment. The name 'Reform School' is a misnomer; it is a prison, set upon destroying them. But someone sees these boys differently – resurrection, life comes to these battered children through one Clement Mathieu who through friendship communicates the resurrection-al beauty of music, the wonder of song. It is through singing that life comes to the dead, in particular to Morhange. The song they sing says it all: "Feel in the dead of night, the depths of despair, a surging wave of hope, the fervour of life, the glorious path". This is a story, an existential story about resurrection, rebellion against death, life!

And what of the Creed of the Peasant Mass? The first time I heard this when working in neighbouring El Salvador, I marvelled that peasant communities who for generations since the Spanish conquest have been numbered among the living dead with their history of persecution and oppression; that they could actually compose and sing with full-hearts this resurrection-al creed. Resurrection comes to them as they sing, as they resist, as they say no to death. "I believe in You companion Christ: human, worker, victor over death, who through your immense sacrifice created the new human being to be liberated...I believe in your struggle, I believe in your resurrection." In celebrating *His* resurrection these peasant communities continue *to insist upon their own*, challenging the dominant Central American culture of death (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdoKE4kJss0>)

Resurrection happens *in* reality...if only we have the eyes to see!

## **The Gospel**

With this in mind let us look with new eyes at the story of Jesus' appearance to the apostles in the Upper Room.

The scene is not the place of a week ago, Easter Sunday's empty tomb. The tomb invites spiritual experience, where time and eternity intersect. The Upper Room is very different, in fact very modern, very tangible; geometric lines, four walls, a locked door, and of course Jesus' greeting of peace: *equally* tangible, something born in material, relational experience! Thomas in this account *is the modern man*. Not initially present, he refuses to swallow the apostles' story and demands that he see, feel and interpret, that he understand *for himself*. Thomas possesses an integrated intelligence; his faith has to rest in part upon empirical experience, faith cannot by-pass reality, the world's realities. And so he palpably touches the wounds, the bloodied holes in the body of the resurrected one; just as Clement Mathieu touches the emotional wounds of the boys and the Peasant Creed touches the painful wounds of the peasant communities.

In the Upper Room resurrection is embedded *in* reality, in the wounds of reality; just as resurrection always must be, for resurrection seeks to overcome such wounds, overcome death.

On December 1<sup>st</sup> 1955, Rosa Parks a demure Africa American seamstress from Montgomery, Alabama, declined to surrender her bus-seat to a white man, as custom demanded (see her below). With her refusal and her arrest there began the resurrection-al moment of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the birth of the civil rights movement in America. Grounded in the wounds of reality resurrection began.

As an Easter community when we give expression to resurrection among the wounds of the suffering in and beyond this community, we verify the power, the reality of Jesus' own resurrection; that of which Lessing, Hume and many of our contemporary age are so sceptical.



Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781)



David Hume (1711-1776)



Rosa Parks (1913-2005)