

Nourishment for the Journey

Ruminations on John 20.19-29

The four gospels all tell a different story with regard to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The facts are all different, but the essence is the same: something divine was present in Jesus. The values he taught and lived were sacred. And in that these values were eternal, not ephemeral, they beckon us, as did he, to live by them as well.

I am often surprised by Christians who claim that it makes all the difference to them that Jesus was physically "resurrected." There are two problems that I see with this: a "what" and a "why" – what was/is meant by resurrection, and why it is deemed important to one's faith.

The first problem is that many misunderstand that "resurrection," to the ancient mind, was not the same thing as "resuscitation." Jesus resuscitated several persons throughout his ministry, but they eventually went on to die just like everyone else. Resuscitation is not forever. We all have to die sometime. And, today, there are tests we can use to determine whether something is actually dead or alive.

Resurrection, on the other hand, is not a literal or a physical event, but rather a mythic and spiritual happening. It is of an entirely different category of perception than resuscitation. No tests or experiments can be done to determine resurrection, for resurrection does not happen to bodies, but to spirits...not to beings, but to axiological constructs...not to literal or historical things that exist in a scientifically verifiable way, but to mytho-poetic perceptions or intuitions that are real to the "hearts, minds, and souls" of the faithful.

There is empirical evidence possible for determining whether or not someone is resuscitated that is not available for determining resurrection. We can "know," through scientific experimentation whether someone was dead and resuscitated. But we cannot "know" whether a person was resurrected. Indeed, it is a nonsensical question to ask, for it is a matter of faith and not of knowledge. Their "resurrection" is apperceived through our "spirit." Intuition, imagination, creativity, and mytho-poetic understanding are the tools of faith. They provide us with meaning, value, worth, purpose, and other suggestive realities that are not knowable through science.

When people use the phrase, "bodily resurrection," they have conflated the meanings of resuscitation and resurrection. There is no such thing as bodily resurrection; for that would be resuscitation. To be resurrected, however, is to be transformed – to have one's identity pass from the temporal to the eternal...from the realm of corporeal existence to the realm of spiritual reality. That which is eternal belongs to and beyond the ages because it is a sacred reality that is available to all persons, at all times, in all cultures.

Eternal, by the way, did not mean "forever and ever, time immortal," but rather was a way about talking about a status of meaning/being/purpose that was real "outside of time and space." That which is eternal is so important that time and space cannot contain it. While what is eternal is "experienced" within time and space, its reality is beyond them. Eternal realities are thus mytho-poetically experienced and transcendentally/spiritually real.

Divine virtues and sacred values were considered eternal. They were "real," even though they did not physically "exist." We affirm that love, peace, justice, and all the other character traits attributed to God are real to us in our lives, but we cannot scientifically test or experiment with them to determine if they "exist." Indeed, to try to do so confuses what they are.

The second problem has to do with "why" people say Jesus needed to be physically resuscitated. I have heard it stated that if this was not the case, then all life, his and ours, is hopeless, meaningless, purposeless,

etc. How odd to my ears! Why would a person's values and virtues be lacking in worth and meaning simply because the person died and did not come back to life? Whether one believes Jesus was resuscitated or not, the eyes of faith proclaim that he was resurrected. That is, his value, worth, and meaning transcend his materiality and temporality. His virtues are eternal. They can be experienced as real to all who trust in them. He was, in a very real spiritual sense, resurrected in us – all who follow his way of life and seek to live by his values. We "become," not literally but mytho-poetically, the body and spirit of Christ in this world as we emulate his virtues.

How we live on this earth should matter independently of whether we are physically resuscitated or reconstituted. If we are only loving because we seek a heavenly reward or fear a hellish punishment, a view that was not that of Jesus but was constructed long after his life, then we are not living morally and virtuously, but rather prudently and pragmatically. We are not to have ulterior motives in being good. Being good is its own reward – spiritually speaking. How selfish of us to require a reward for being good!

If we do good for its own sake, simply because it is good to do good, then we are following Christ and living in Jesus' same Spirit. If, however, our reason for being good is to live forever or perhaps eternally, then we are simply living in accordance to "enlightened" egotism. We are essentially looking out for ourselves, rather than being selfless in looking out for others. This, of course, was not the way of Christ; whom we believe loved us unconditionally and wanted what was best for us regardless of the consequences to him. If we'd find it objectionable for Jesus to have lived for purely selfish reasons, then why, if we are to follow in his ways, would we find it alright for us to act so self-centeredly?

In sum, I don't "know" whether or not Jesus was physically resuscitated or not. And I don't need to know. It is not important to my faith in his virtues and values in the least. I do, however, have faith that what was most essential and worthy about him was indeed resurrected – not only in the hearts, minds, and souls of his disciples who knew him, but for all of us who have come after and have trusted that believing in what he stood for, and against, is worthy of our life commitments. He modeled the sacred and divine, and showed us how to do the same. This is far more valuable in my mind than that he was physically resuscitated without a spiritual resurrection. To mytho-poetically inspire us for over two millennia, transforming our spirits as well as his own, gives me a meaning and purpose I could not have if he were substantively different from us. That we "can" go and do likewise gives me impetus to do my utmost to live by those same divine virtues and sacred values that he told us we could and should.

Scientifically, I admit to not having any of the answers about Jesus. But then what is most important is not factual, but rather spiritual, moral, ethical, and mytho-poetical. I'd rather have meaning, purpose, and worth in my life than to be right about the facts and know exactly what happened historically. What about you?

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 3/31/2016