

Resurrection

The reality of God's love for us is revealed in Christ crucified, dead, and risen. Living within the image of the grain of wheat opens up our hearts to the Crucified One; the resurrection stories close the circle. Here we meet the Risen One and are assimilated to him.¹ Our hearts are once again transformed as we are drawn into the One who is the Beloved of the Father and who loves the Father in return. This knowing and being known, this loving and being loved brings us home, for this is our true destiny. This seems to be something of what Jesus had in mind when he prayed:

I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may be perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.

(John 17:20-23)

Coming from long days of living within the image of the grain of wheat that brings the shadow of the cross into my very being, it seems very easy to understand something of what was going on inside the hearts of the disciples as they hid together in the upper room.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the door being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:19-23).

I can feel their fear and the heavy sense of betrayal that suffocated them. Their hopes are all gone. The power of darkness has conquered and now it is devouring their souls. Then, the unspeakable! He is present in their midst. "Peace be with you." The terror is displaced by hope, by the presence of what I had given up hoping for. He knows my fears. He reads through my betrayal. He shows me the scars that betrayal brought him, but there is no accusation. "Peace be with you." He embraces my whirling heart. The spirit of his victory and compassion floods into me and I come alive. Then, he sends me.

This is almost too good to be true. As a matter of fact this is Thomas' reaction.

Now Thomas one of the twelve, called the twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." (John 20:24-25)

How I know this Thomas. There is a refreshing bluntness to his scepticism. He has seen too many dead bodies to believe just because the others say so. Who knows, perhaps they are cracking up. This echoes in my heart bringing to the fore my own doubts. I read the gospel stories. My hopes flare up.

My heart is moved, then somehow the old doubts come back. I can see much of myself in this man who won't pretend he believes. My terror and guilt seem to be so deep that it is hard to break them once and for all. In the meantime I can use Thomas as my model. He did not abandon the community of believers just because he had doubts. He stayed with them because he knew that only Jesus could heal his heart, if only . . . if only it all were true. Eight days later he came to see, the doubts that had tortured him were dispelled by the presence of the Risen One. "My Lord and my God." This was the decisive turning point in Thomas' life. He was freed from the doubts that had always strangled him. Knowing how my own doubts ravage my heart and longing to really believe, I can sense how such a coming to faith would be like being freed from the bonds of death. It would be like a resurrection.

Stepping into this story with Thomas I discover two things. If only the presence of the Risen One can free me of these killing doubts, then I must stay in the community of faith, patiently waiting for the Lord, but waiting for him inside the resurrection stories. If I open up my heart to Peter and Mary Magdalen and their meetings with the Risen One perhaps I, too, can meet him and experience something of the power of his resurrection in my heart. Secondly, the existence into which Jesus entered with his resurrection is beyond words; but I can see something of it as it touched Thomas. It is a world where doubts no longer kill us. As I see how this healed Peter and Mary perhaps the reality of the resurrection will seem less vague and the Lord will be able to use this to draw me into his new life.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and

one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Saying this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." (John 20:11-17)

My own doubts draw me into Mary's terrors. Like Mary I have journeyed with Jesus. He has saved me from a grubby life of chaos and despair. He has given me hope. He has understood me and loved me as no one else. Then he's gone, murdered by the fear and selfishness, the resentment that he had embraced in me. Now the terror that I am all alone after all wells up inside me. If Jesus can't break this annihilating isolation I'm doomed. I can't even find his body. This man asks me why I'm weeping, who it is I want. I'm weeping from despair and loss. I tremble with terror. I search in utter desperation for the One my heart loves. Years ago my troubled scattered heart sought many things. Now it is him alone. But he is gone, killed, and the new life he had begun in me is collapsing.

Then I hear him calling me by name, that special name that lets me know how he treasures me. In the story it is "Mary" but as I turn this over in my heart again and again I hear my own name. I know the Risen One is there, that he wants me; and my heart is drawn out of the terror of death. I'm not alone. He is with me. Healed by this I am sent to share this new life with my brothers and sisters. What is this

resurrected life like? It's hard to say. What exactly is the Risen One like? I have no words. But after he has touched me, the terror that I am alone is gone. I feel like I am alive for the first time. My previous life now looks like a kind of death. Here I discover that whatever else happened to Jesus at his resurrection, he seems to have entered into a way of being where terror cannot reach; and as I live in this story that way of living is even now beginning in me.

Peter's meeting with the Risen Lord was somewhat different. He had pledged himself to Jesus, then betrayed him. This haunted Peter. Added to the collapse of his hopes was the crushing burden of his denials.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God). And after this he said to him, "Follow me" (John 21:15-19).

Many things stir in Peter's heart. He is overjoyed to see Jesus. But he is also unsure. His betrayal eats at him. These last days, days of fear, betrayal, defeat, and overwhelming isolation, have changed Peter. The brashness is gone. He is painfully aware of his limits. The awful possibilities of the human heart are well known to him. Finally, Jesus turns to him, turns to me: "Do you love me?" In the past I said "Yes"

so quickly, with such easy and unjustified confidence. Now, it is so hard to tell, except that these days have stripped me and forced me to see that if there is anyone I love it is Jesus. "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Then, he sends me to share this with others: "Feed my lambs." Again the same question, and a third time. This is killing. Three questions for three denials. My shame is exposed. My dark side gently but firmly brought into the light. He forces me to act it out. But this is reconciliation, not accusation. He embraces me in my deepest sinfulness. What I have always hidden from in myself he accepts. What I have always feared and hated he is willing to face. He loves me anyhow. As he embraces me in my utter vulnerability the gnawing suspicion that I am unlovable dissolves. He sees right through me. I no longer have to pretend and hide; he loves me just as I am. He still chooses me. He sends me to care for his flock. A weight is lifted. I sob in quiet, thankful peace. I don't have to pretend anymore. He loves me clear through. This is a resurrection.

To really be touched by the Risen One is like awakening from a nightmare of fear and guilt and unending loneliness. It is like coming back from the dead. Here we begin to know what the resurrection means, for it has already begun in us. We begin to understand something of what Jesus was talking about when he said:

I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die (John 11:25-26).

¹For background on the Resurrection stories see R.H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*. N.Y.: Macmillan, 1971.

A Non-Systematic Postscript

For most of us our religious lives began with intuitive impressions and responses. We glimpsed our vulnerability; we somehow were brought to trust an awesome presence that seemed to surround us and support us. These deep flashes of our childhood were connected with the silence of the church on Sunday morning, the presence of parents, the stories we were told about Jesus. The experiences were intense but without words. The connections with church and family and Jesus gave us simple ways of understanding something of what was happening to us.

Later years gave us an avalanche of words. Our catechism study filled our heads with definitions and precise summaries of long and complicated developments. Jesus was the second person of the Trinity, two natures in one God. The Church was . . . sacraments were . . . This information was duly tucked away. We accepted it as true, as terribly important. But the exact connection of all of this to what happened when I went to mass, or what my heart experienced when I said my prayers, was hazy. Surprisingly, I hardly realized how hazy it was. I believed; I said my prayers; I was accustomed to live with what could not be understood.

Praying within the Gospel stories can give me a new experience of Jesus and of myself, as well as a new way of thinking about those experiences. Jesus is the one who

knows how to pray. He is the Beloved of the Father, the Guiltless One. He is the one who gives away his life for me. He is the Risen One. I am the one who will never be at peace until I, too, like Jesus, am the beloved of the Father. I am the one being healed of my blindness, called to wait, to be pure of heart. This starts to put new life into the answers I memorized as a child. To say that Jesus is the Beloved Son of the Father is to see the real meaning behind the statement that he is the second person of the Trinity. To experience how Jesus calls me with the very voice of God at the same time that I see him walking the hills of Galilee is to transform the words "one person in two natures" from intellectual furniture of the mind into knowledge of the heart. To speak of transforming the facts of our lives into mysteries opens up to us a new way of looking at the sacraments and our whole life in the church. The experiences we live and the religious language we speak start to converge and our lives become more integrated. This can be a great help.

With good cause someone might ask: "But what of the Spirit?" The early Christians came to see that Jesus was divine, but that he was not the Father. After all Jesus had not been praying to himself. The history of this development is complicated,¹ but one of the central convictions that emerged from it was the insight that in his human life Jesus lived out that which constituted the eternal relationship of the Son to the Father. As a man, everything he did, everything he was, was a translation into human terms, not just of divinity, but of the divinity of the Son; so it was the divinity that was derived, received. How was that lived out in a human way? Through Jesus' acceptance of the unconditional love of his Father, the living of a life that was pure gift, as what was given by the Father. This resulted in his making manifest the true nature of the Father. "He who has

seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). Of course, the complement of his receiving his being from the Father was his turning to the Father in love, in obedience, in prayer, in purity of heart. "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (Jn. 4:34).

This acting out of sonship was pushed to an extreme in Jesus' death on the cross. In a very real way the man from Nazareth became his act of trust in the Father, became the Son's love for the Father in human form, total, whole, complete. Even in the flesh he was that relationship to the Father. With the resurrection the unrestrained giving that was the Father's relationship to his son flooded even into the flesh of Jesus. Gradually the Christian tradition came to see that this reciprocal relationship of love between the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit. That reciprocal relationship of unconditional acceptance and purity of heart, which is the Holy Spirit, was unleashed on the world at the resurrection. The Risen One became the sender of the Spirit, and it is the gift of the spirit of God's love poured into our hearts (Rom. 5:5) that calls us to give our hearts to this Jesus. The Spirit, then, has been in our hearts drawing us to hope, to trust, to follow Jesus. He has been there prodding us, breaking down the barriers of fear and guilt that keep us back from our true home, the interior life of God where Father and Son and Spirit are one.

¹For the scriptural development see Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*. N.Y.: Scribners, 1965; for the patristic and early conciliar development see A. Grillmeir, *Christ in Christian Tradition*. London: Mowbray and Co., 1964.