

29_DO CHRISTIANS HAVE TO BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION?

Fr Luigi Gioia
Theologian In Residence

1. We know how, especially from the XIX century, there has been a tendency to appreciate Jesus, his message, and even his death, as exceptional examples of love and selflessness.
 - 1.1. Jesus changed the world because of the power of his message and of his example.
 - 1.2. He lives on as an inspiration for those who embrace his 'good news', his gospel, proclaim it, and found communities based on it.
2. From this viewpoint, the resurrection tends to be considered as what happened in the life of a group of totally ordinary people (Jesus' disciples) who overnight changed into formidably assured, fearless, and effective preachers and spread Jesus' message everywhere in the then known world.
3. In this framework the Resurrection is not primarily about Jesus, but is the change that happens in the lives of Jesus' disciples:

“Christ meets us in the preaching as one crucified and risen. [...] If the event of Easter Day is in any sense an historical event additional to the event of the cross, it is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord, since it was this faith which led to the apostolic preaching.

The resurrection itself is not an event of past history.

All that historical criticism can establish is the fact that the first disciples came to believe in the resurrection [...].

The historical problem is not of interest to Christian belief in the resurrection.”¹
4. The interest of Bultmann's viewpoint is that faith in the Resurrection is paramount. To the question: *Do Christians have to believe in the Resurrection?* – Bultmann's answer is that this is what makes them Christian.
 - 4.1. And yet paradoxically his approach to faith in the Resurrection becomes a way to shift the focus away from the historical Jesus to human lives.
 - 4.2. It is a way of saying that whatever happened to Jesus after his death (Bultmann thinks that we cannot know), what matters about the Resurrection is that it changes us.
5. What should we make of this approach? Does faith in the Resurrection require us to believe that something *did* happen to Jesus after his crucifixion? Are not the Gospels clear about this?

a. _____

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *The New Testament and Mythology*, [ed.], Hans-Werner Bartsch, [trans.], Reginald H. Fuller, *Kerygma and Myth. A Theological Debate*, Vol. 1 [London: SPCK, 1972]), 41-43. 1

6. The reality is that the Gospels of the Resurrection are not without complexities and even ambiguities – starting from the way they relate the bare facts surrounding the mysterious disappearance of Jesus' body:
 - 6.1. the empty tomb;
 - 6.2. the large entrance stone rolled away (Mark 16.3f);
 - 6.3. the strips of linen and the burial cloth left behind (John 20.6f).
7. The gospels also tell us that within few hours after the discovery of the empty tomb two competing narratives had started to spread:
 - 7.1. some people suspected Jesus' disciples of having come at night time to steal the body while the guards were asleep (Mt 28.13);
 - 7.2. others, especially a group of women, pretended to have seen angels and even Jesus himself alive (Luke 24.23f).
8. There is a lack of consistency between the various accounts of these events in the four gospels. Besides the material discrepancies, a striking conundrum besets the resurrection narratives:
 - 8.1. if and when Jesus is supposed to have shown himself alive with his own body, the people who had known him and lived with him for years doubted his identity (Matthew 28.17) and struggled to recognize him.
 - 8.2. He sounds like an intrusive know-it-all when he gives advice about how to throw the nets to his closest friends and seasoned fishermen John and Peter (John 21.1-10),
 - 8.3. entertains the unsuspecting disciples of Emmaus for hours as a perfect stranger (Luke 24.13.35),
 - 8.4. and is mistaken for a gardener even by Mary who knew him well (John 20.15).
9. According to the Gospels, Jesus is alive in a way which is unheard of: he can cook breakfast and enjoy cooked fish but also passes through closed doors and sports gaping wounds that do not hurt him anymore.
10. The credibility of these accounts seems compromised especially when we are told that this mysterious character is identified as Jesus because those who meet him experience a burning of the heart (Luke 24.32).
 - 10.1. Feelings are notoriously unreliable: they have hidden causes in our subconscious, are influenced by social expectations and are liable to be manipulated.
 - 10.2. You cannot trust witnesses who tell you that Jesus is alive because they "felt" it was him!
11. In short, the curious aspect of the Gospels' approach to the Resurrection is that they do not bother with apologetics, they do not try to prove something at all costs:
 - 11.1. they are not afraid of reporting skeptical or competing narratives,
 - 11.2. plainly acknowledge the ambiguities of the encounters with the risen Jesus
 - 11.3. and do not disguise the role played by feelings.
12. Clearly for the Gospels the decisive trigger for belief in the resurrection lies not in arguments, facts, feelings, and verifiable proofs. It has to be looked for elsewhere.

13. This trigger is described as a sudden realization punctuated by some of some of the most moving exclamations of the New Testament:
 - 13.1. “My Lord and my God!” from Thomas (John 20.28),
 - 13.2. “Rabbouni” from Mary (John 20.16) and
 - 13.3. “It is the Lord” from John and Peter (John 21.16).
14. The burning of the heart (that is “feelings”) plays a role in this realization but its full significance is appreciated only retrospectively: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road?” (Luke 24.32).
 - 14.1. In other words, feelings play a role only in relation to another much more decisive factor described through the suggestive image of the ‘opening of eyes’:

“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (Luke 24.30f).
 - 14.2. The belief that Jesus is alive is portrayed as a sudden realization prompted by an action apparently unrelated to the nature of the resurrection.
 - 14.3. How can the sharing of a loaf of bread allow the disciples to make sense of the chain of intriguing events that had followed Jesus’ death?
 - 14.4. Let us look more closely into this page of Luke’s Gospel.
15. In Luke’s Gospel we find the story of the two disciples who, after the crucifixion of Jesus, thought that all was over, that hope was lost, and resolved to leave Jerusalem and return to what presumably was their native village of Emmaus.
 - 15.1. Luke says about the disciples of Emmaus that even if Jesus was walking with them -the same Jesus they had lived with for several years- they did not know it was him. We are told that “their eyes were prevented from recognizing him” (Lk 24.16).
 - 15.2. The same thing recurs several times even when Jesus manifests himself to all the disciples at once: “Jesus stood among them” but the disciples thought that they were seeing a ghost (Lk 24.36f) or, in John’s Gospel, Mary thinks that he is the gardener (John 20.15).
16. Interestingly, this was not the disciples’ fault, nor the result of negligence on their part.
 - 16.1. During the years they had spent living with Jesus before the crucifixion, they had seen God under the form of a human being in everything similar to them.
 - 16.2. After the resurrection, Jesus appears to them as the Lord – he is no longer visible, perceptible in the same way as before.
 - 16.3. We are not simply told that the disciples did not recognize Jesus, but that *they were prevented* from doing so

Lk 24 [15](#) While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. [16](#) But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.
 - 16.4. This delay in the recognition of God is intended, it is part of the process we have to undergo to have access to a new form of awareness of God, and of self-awareness.
 - 16.5. From now on Jesus, as the Risen Lord, cannot simply be seen, but has to be *recognized*.
17. One of the major obstacles to this recognition is that the two disciples were so caught up

with their take on the events that they were not able to pay attention to the stranger who had joined them on the way.

- 17.1. They were focused on the past, “conversing about all the things that had occurred” (Lk 24.13)
- 17.2. They were afraid because their expectations for the future had been crushed: “we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel” (Lk 24.21).
- 17.3. Interestingly, their sorrow, anxiety, distraction were such that not only they had no *awareness of the Lord’s presence by their side* but they had *no self-awareness* either – they were unable to realize that from the very moment the stranger had joined them something had changed in them, as they acknowledge only at the end:
“Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24.32).
- 17.4. Worry about the past, anxiety about the future, sorrow, disappointment prevent us from being in the here and now, from abiding in the present moment, and realizing that the solution, the answer, the rescue is there already, right under our noses. What stops us from benefiting from it is our lack of recognition.
- 17.5. The curious teaching of this page of the Gospel though is that we would not be capable of this recognition straight away even if we wanted to. The delay is intentional – they were *prevented* from recognizing him.
- 17.6. This delay and this inability stem from the fact that
 - i. we are not equipped for this kind of recognition.
 - ii. that something fundamental needs to change in our way of seeing, perceiving, tasting things, or more generally in our attitude towards reality for this recognition to happen.
- 18. Owing to our Western and Modern mindset, we constantly and inadvertently practice a form of utilitarian knowledge of reality, God and ourselves included, that can be characterized as grasping, defining, judging, mastering, objectifying, putting to use.
 - 18.1. This approach has made us immensely effective, it has allowed us to develop science, technology, improve our physical well-being, it has given us a greater control of nature, of life expectancy and of our future.
 - 18.2. We cast everything we encounter into a problem and are absolutely confident in our ability to find a solution, sooner or later.
 - 18.3. Until, that is, we encounter situations which cannot be squeezed into this functional model.
- 19. The disciples of Emmaus were treating Jesus’s tragic death and the disappearance of his body in this functional and utilitarian way, that is as a riddle for which there must be a right answer.
 - 19.1. They were so overwhelmed by their trauma, so crushed by their disappointment about the past and their worry about the future, that they could not see what was offered to them in the present moment, as they were walking – they could not see that the Lord Jesus was with them then and there.
 - 19.2. Because they were looking for explanations and solutions they were unable to pay attention to the actual way in which God was answering their prayer, instructing them, making himself known to them, being present to them.

20. It is fascinating to see how Jesus helps them to journey towards this recognition.
- 20.1. He could simply have told them: “It is me, I am here, I am alive!” – but he doesn’t.
 - 20.2. Recognition cannot be provided from outside. Instead, patiently, Jesus leads the disciples through four stages:
 - i. listening,
 - ii. meditation,
 - iii. prayer, and
 - iv. letting God take care of them, feed them, show them his love.
 - 20.3. Only once they (and us) go through all these stages *recognition* can well up from within.
21. The *listening* first:
- 21.1. Jesus joins the disciples as they walk and listens to their anxious conversation for a while.
 - 21.2. In Scripture God asks us to listen to him, but in the Gospel we often see that the way Jesus heals us begins with him listening to our needs, our requests, our cry for help.
22. Then Jesus starts a *meditation* of Scripture with them: “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures” (Lk 24.27).
- 22.1. The way Jewish people meditated on Scripture was abiding with the text long enough to let all sorts of associations between passages of Scripture they had memorized gently come to the surface.
 - 22.2. By this meditation, Jesus helped the disciples to hear the voice of God through Scripture and become alert to God’s presence in their lives.
 - 22.3. Even after this meditation however the disciples were still kept from recognizing him – more was needed.
23. Here comes *prayer*:
- 23.1. “As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. But they urged him, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over” (Lk 24.28f).
 - 23.2. The meditation had not solved their problem, but managed to assuage their sorrow, calm their anxious thoughts, alleviate their worries.
 - 23.3. Something had started to change in them, and for this reason they felt the urge to pray: “Stay with us”. This prayer expressed their commitment and desire to go deeper in this process.
24. Here we reach the decisive stage. They were still unable to recognize Jesus but thanks to the listening, the meditation and prayer they had become willing to pay attention. *They were ready to let God come closer to them, share a meal with them, feed them, take care of them, love them:*
- “While he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight” (Lk 24.30-31).
- 24.1. Only at this moment their eyes are opened and we see two things happening at once:

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

- i. the recognition of the Risen Lord and
 - ii. a new form of self-awareness, as they acknowledge at the end:

“Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?” (Lk 24.32).
- 24.2.** Listening, meditation and prayer had been a prelude to this. They had helped the disciples to suspend their judgement, patiently abide with the mystery, start trusting again that there might be another way of overcoming their impasse, let go of their trauma, anxiety and worry, and open a space where Jesus could make himself known to them in the unheard-of way in which he is present now.
- 24.3.** The breaking of the bread was the moment when Jesus reminded them of what he had revealed to them during the last supper: he had come not only to instruct them, but especially to feed them, care for them.
- 24.4.** What happened in that instant is that finally they overcame their exclusive reliance on facts, explanation, and certainties – and in so doing, allowed Jesus to give them what they were really looking for, that is the *assurance* that the love of God is stronger than death.
- 25.** Therefore, faith in the resurrection requires narrative, interpretation, explanation, listening, questioning, doubting.
- 25.1.** However it does not come as the mere logical conclusion of an argument.
 - 25.2.** It takes facts into consideration, is accompanied by feelings, but neither are decisive.
 - 25.3.** It needs a **catalyst**, something that all of a sudden gives a coherent shape to all the scattered and previously disjointed pieces of the puzzle.
- 26.** This catalyst for the disciples at Emmaus was the breaking of bread Jesus asked us to repeat in his memory – that is what we keep doing in our Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist.
- 27.** Sunday masses though become the eye-opening catalyst for our faith in the resurrection only if the preconditions suggested by the gospel of Emmaus are fulfilled.
- 27.1.** First, we need to be prepared by the reading of Scripture and a rich, compelling, well-prepared homily.
 - 27.2.** Then, the heart has to be fed by authentic heartfelt greetings, meaningful and joyful exchanges of the sign of peace, a sense of belonging that is not confined to the time of the celebration.
 - 27.3.** Finally, we have to receive the Eucharist not just by eating it but by embodying its meaning and movement in our lives.
 - 27.4.** The breaking of bread is Jesus’ gift of himself to us. When we take part in it, we accept to live not just for ourselves but for everyone else, in the countless and unforeseeable small and big ways we will find occasions for in our daily life.
- 28.** In the end this is why the gospel writers were not afraid to acknowledge the ambiguities of the facts and the inconsistencies of the narratives of the resurrection.
- 28.1.** They knew that our eyes are opened to the presence and action of the risen Christ in history only when we recognize it in the unheard-of solidarity of our Christian communities, in the inclusive and non-judgmental love that wins over those who come close to us and makes them feel truly welcome

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

28.2. This is the only real ‘proof’ of the resurrection that opens the eyes as it makes our hearts burn:

“It is your love for one another that will prove to the world that you are my disciples” (John 13.35).