

Topic 20: The Role of Symbols in the Encounter with the Risen Jesus

I. Presuppositions for Interpreting the Resurrection: The New Testament has not accounts of the event of God raising Jesus from the dead, no imaginative reconstructions of "what actually happened." Rather, we have stories of Jesus' disciples finding an empty tomb and The disciples encountering Jesus alive

Ordinary imagination tends to view the resurrection as the resuscitation of a corpse. The New Testament focuses on an action by God which gives rise to the affirmation that Jesus is alive. Through this action by God "the eschatological" irrupts into history. As a result, the true reality of Jesus and the true destiny of God's people begins to dawn.

The way we understand the New Testament witness to the resurrection not only involves the usual historical distance from the events in question, but a metaphysical distance that arises from the eschatological nature of these events. The New Testament writers express the experience and impact of this event using narrative and symbols. The resurrection is not recounted in the New Testament because it is not an "empirical historical" event but an eschatological-historical event. At the same time, in principle something can be known and said about the resurrection. To speak of a meta-historical resurrection presupposes the occurrence of experiential events which are interpreted as saving acts of God in Christ. Reflection on our own religious experiences gives us a basis in analogy for interpreting the experience of the disciples. Therefore, the notion of religious experience thus holds the key to understanding the resurrection. As a religious experience, the resurrection is best appropriated theologically by making use of the categories of religious experience and religious symbol.

Scripture presents the resurrection as a trans-historical event that decisively affects history. A basic tension thus appears: Discontinuity: on the one hand, the disciples were given the grace to experience the appearances of Jesus, but this experience is unlike any other. Analogy: on the other hand, what happened to Jesus corresponds in some way to some expectation based on the nature of human beings.

The resurrection dawns on human consciousness as the anticipation, sign, and condition of the eschaton. As part of a larger complex of eschatological events, it anticipates the in-breaking of the eschaton and signifies that the eschaton has already begun.

The resurrection is an eschatological action by God that establishes Jesus as

definitively alive. To speak of "the resurrection of Jesus" involves speaking of a direct action by God that affected Jesus and confirmed the truth of his life.

Moreover, because Jesus was an innocent victim, his resurrection expresses God's power not only over death but injustice. Jesus' resurrection changes the way we think about God, Jesus, and human beings: the Father raises Jesus and pours out his Spirit on us. Christian thought has a Trinitarian logic. The God who raises Jesus is a new God who will be understood in Trinitarian terms. With Jesus, reflection moves from

- What happened to him, to
- His actual reality, to
- The proclamation of his indissoluble union with God

Regarding human beings, those who lived with Jesus received the grace (of the Spirit) to see and to know him and the mission to follow and bear witness to him.

II. Theological implications of the encounter with the risen Jesus

The experience of the risen Jesus results from an initiative from God. It cannot be accounted for by human potentialities alone; it is a grace. It is not the result of mere projection; it has a basis in reality. Moreover, this experience is the only reasonable way to account for the change that occurred in the lives of the disciples.

The objective basis of the resurrection experience is Jesus of Nazareth, his actual life and death, and the impression he made on his disciples. The force of this assertion appears when we ask, "Why was this Jesus raised?"

Jesus preached a God who is utterly boundless and faithful love. If Jesus is alive is then what Jesus preached about God is true. Conversely, if Jesus' portrayal of God is true, then Jesus is alive. The necessity involved in this argument is existential, not logical: faith in the resurrection parallels faith in God as loving creator.

Jesus himself was raised because of the way he lived his life (Phil 2.6-11): this kind of life, the life of this man, leads to life in God. Through the resurrection of Jesus God has "reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18).

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What has to happen to us today for us to understand what the first disciples expressed in terms of resurrection?
2. What New Testament passage allowed you to more fully understand the resurrection? What did this passage bring to light?