

THE RESURRECTION—DEATH TO DOUBT

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ASTER MORNING is often painted in sharply contrasting colors. The glory of the Risen Christ is set against a background which accentuates the darkness of the tomb. This is indeed befitting, not only for purposes of art, but also as symbolic of the two aspects of Easter: 1) the hidden brilliance of the mystery of the Resurrection, a brilliance so intense that it appears to our feeble minds to be darkness, and 2) the shining light of an historical fact, the indisputable truth that Jesus of Nazareth was put to death and now has risen.

These two aspects are as two sides of the same reality. One side can be seen by anyone who will examine the historical records; the other can be accepted on faith alone, and that with an obscurity to be removed only when God is seen face-to-face. As St. Paul wrote: "We see now through a mirror in a dark manner, but then face to face" (I Cor. 13, 12). There is, however, another link between these two aspects. The historical *fact* of that first Easter morn is one of the *signs* that God has given to us in order that we may reasonably accept the mystery of the Resurrection, together with all the other mysteries of our Faith. In truth, then, it may be said that the Resurrection deals the death-blow to all doubts.

I—VISION OF THE UNSEEABLE

Seeing is not believing! In fact, the two are opposed. For to "see" intellectually means that one grasps the truth of a statement, and that from the very terms, the very elements, of the statement itself. It connotes also the acceptance of a conclusion drawn, in a most evident way, from propositions which we know to be true. The common expression: "I *see* what you mean." indicates, to a certain extent, the everyday usage of the word "see" in this respect. Then, too, the geometrical proposition: "the whole is equal to the sum of its parts" is illustrative of "seeing" the truth of a statement from the very terms of that statement. Belief, on the other hand, is another thing entirely. When we say that we "believe," we mean we accept a certain statement, not because we can see its truth ourselves but rather because we rely on the authority of someone else. For example, we believe

the fact that the Ohio River is 963 miles long. Why? Certainly not because we have personally measured its winding course, but rather we rest on the reliable authority of the geographers who performed that tedious task.

All faith, then, is of the unseen. It concerns those things which we do not perceive, physically or intellectually. Now divine or supernatural faith is of the "unseeable." This is so because supernatural faith deals with truths so sublime, so lofty that we could never, left to ourselves, arrive at a knowledge of them. It is necessary, therefore, that we be told these truths—if we are ever to know them. And even after God reveals them to us our minds cannot understand them in their full extent. Human intellects cannot comprehend these truths fully, for they are mysteries which cannot be coped with adequately by human intelligence.

Our minds, nevertheless, can reasonably consent to these truths if certain conditions are present. An example of human faith may clarify this. If an expert in a certain field of science, a man known to be honest, were to tell you something, you would accept it much more readily than if an inveterate liar or one who repeatedly gets details confused were to relate it to you. In the latter instance, you would not be sure whether this particular event ever occurred or not. Three conditions, therefore, seem imperative to belief:

- 1) that someone testify to a statement;
- 2) that this person have the necessary knowledge;
- 3) that this person be truthful.

It should be remembered that these three conditions do not show us the inner truth of the statement, but they do indicate reasons for believing it. They are motives of credibility. There is, then, both vision and belief, seeing and believing, but not with regard to the same thing. We see, i.e., we recognize the intrinsic truth of the *credibility*; we believe, i.e., we accept on authority, the particular statement in question.

It is in the verification of these three conditions of credibility that there exists a marked difference (though not the essential one) between human and divine faith. In order to give assent to the testimony of another fellow-human, the questions most difficult to solve are: "Does he have the necessary knowledge?" and "Is he truthful?" Usually, there is no difficulty in verifying the

first condition, i.e. "Did he say this?" for often enough we hear the testimony first-hand. In divine faith, on the other hand, we have no difficulty at all in recognizing God's knowledge and His truthfulness, for He is Truth and Knowledge. He can "neither deceive nor be deceived." Our concern, then, is with the other condition: "Did God testify? Did God speak to man?" As Catholics we know the answer, for as St. Paul says: "God, who, at sundry times and in divers manners, spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all, in these days hath spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1, 1-2). It is good, though, to examine this question—to follow out St. Peter's admonition to be "ready always to satisfy everyone that asketh you a reason of that hope which is in you" (I Petr. 3, 15).

God, in His mercy, has given us many proofs, many signs that He has spoken to us. Among these signs, miracles have a most important although not an exclusive place. And it is the miracles which illumine the life of His Only-Begotten Son, Christ, and His Church, that provide us with the most convincing proofs.

One thing further should be noted in regard to any of these signs. We believe, by the gift of faith, not the signs, but God Himself. The knowledge of the credibility is the necessary condition, but not the cause of the act of faith. In a similar way, a bank-book is a condition to withdraw money from the bank, yet it is the bank-balance which is the cause or reason why we are able to withdraw the money. The knowledge of credibility leads you to the doorway of faith, but it is God Who opens the door—inasmuch as it is He in Whom we believe.

II—OUR GREATEST SIGNPOST TO BELIEF, THE RESURRECTION

There are, as was mentioned above, two ways of considering the Resurrection of Our Lord: as a divinely revealed mystery or as an historical fact. It is in this latter sense that it is a reason or motive for our belief.

The Resurrection is a sensible, historical fact that can only be attributed to the power of God, for it truly exceeds any and all of the powers of man. Only the Author of life can restore life to one who is dead. Since, therefore, the Resurrection surpasses the natural order of things with regard to its cause, it is a fitting and convincing sign, a divine stamp of approval.

A special dignity and probative force is given to the Resurrection in the sense that this event was the climax, the high point

in the life of Christ. Bethlehem and Nazareth prepare the way for Calvary, but the story of Good Friday does not reach its completion until Easter Sunday. Christ came, as He told us, to save mankind; but we are not completely reassured until we see that He has overcome death by His Resurrection. Christ's life in the Church also looks to the Resurrection as a fact of utmost importance.

Indeed, it is of such importance that frequent references are made to it throughout the pages of Holy Scripture. Our Lord Himself chose this sign above others as a proof of His divine mission. He predicted His death and Resurrection to the Pharisees, and in clear, unmistakable terms spoke to His Apostles at least four times of this forthcoming event. Even His enemies took careful notice of His predictions, for did they not guard the tomb with special care (Cf. Matt. 27, 63)?

Another more personal and individual reason for the pre-eminence of the Resurrection as a sign-post of our faith is found in the comfort and encouragement it affords us. It comforts us, for we see in it the sign of Christ's victory over sin; an assurance that we have been redeemed, that we are restored to God's favor. The momentous happenings of that first Easter give us a glimpse, a foreshadowing, a taste, if you will, of our future resurrection, of our life without end with God. The sadness and uncertainty of Good Friday is dispelled by the joy and assurance of the dawn of Easter.

III—THE RESURRECTION REALLY HAPPENED

We have seen already that some signs or motives of credibility are requisite before an act of faith can be made. Moreover, we have considered the Resurrection as pre-eminent among these motives. It remains now to consider the very existence of this sign, and in establishing this, two things should be indicated: first, that Christ really died; and secondly, that He truly arose.

The reality of Christ's death is beyond question, for we have the testimony of eyewitnesses. St. John, who stood beneath the Cross on Calvary with our Blessed Mother, narrates in his Gospel account that: "Jesus therefore, when he had taken the vinegar, said: It is consummated. And bowing his head, he gave up the ghost."¹ Even the Roman soldiers noticed that Our Lord was dead, for they did not break His legs—as was the custom in those

¹ St. John 19, 30.

days to hasten death. And if anyone should think that these were mistaken, a soldier pierced the side of Christ with a lance.

Furthermore the enemies of Christ give ample testimony. Rome, the greatest nation in the world, certified His death, just as she had recorded His birth. For Pilate refused to surrender the body of Jesus for burial until assured by one of his soldiers that the Nazarene had died. The Pharisees, too, add to this testimony by demanding special guards to watch the tomb, lest the body be stolen.

The death of Christ is certain; His Resurrection is, if possible, even more certain. Once again, His enemies admit it. The soldiers assigned to guard duty are paralyzed with fear as Easter morning dawns, and understandably so. They had planned on a routine task of guarding a sealed tomb. But now, terror seizes their hearts as the earth trembles and an angel descends to roll back the stone—not to permit Christ to leave (for He had already arisen), but to show to the whole world the empty sepulchre. The Pharisees admit the Resurrection in actions, if not in words, for they bribe these same guards to lie to the people.

Some of the first Christians doubt, but the answer to their doubts strengthens our certainty of the fact. Mary Magdalene, who had witnessed the raising from the dead of her brother, Lazarus, by the call of Christ, now mistakes the Risen Lord for a gardener. So far is she from anticipating a Resurrection that she asks to be directed to the body of Christ: "Sir, if thou hast removed Him, tell me where thou hast laid Him and I will take Him away."² But we know, as St. John continues in his narration, that Christ reveals Himself to her immediately thereafter. This poignant scene is vividly yet simply recorded by the Evangelist: "Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' Turning, she said to him, 'Rabboni!' (that is to say, 'Master!')."³ Recognition was instantaneous!

Then, too, the disciples whom the Risen Lord met on the road to Emmaus treated Him as a stranger, just a fellow-traveler, and in their conversation they confided that they *had hoped* that Christ was the Messiah. Understanding and recognition came only after Christ had "interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things referring to himself," and had eaten with them in that little village.⁴

² St. John 20, 15.

³ Idem, 20, 16.

⁴ St. Luke 24, 27 sqq.

The story of doubting Thomas, one of the Apostles, is familiar to all Catholics. But in remembering the doubt he voiced, his fervent exclamation: "My Lord and My God," should not be overlooked, for it was a beautiful profession of faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Besides all these reasons for accepting the fact of the Resurrection, more striking yet is the testimony of Our Lord Himself. He demonstrated that He had a true body in appearing to the Apostles gathered together in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. St. Luke narrates the incident for us: "But they were startled and panic-stricken, and thought that they saw a spirit. And he said to them, 'Why are you disturbed, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and feet, that it is I myself. Feel me and see; for a spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.'⁵ And it is the same body that suffered on Calvary, for it still bears the imprint of the wounds. Furthermore, Our Divine Lord gives unquestionable evidence that His soul is united to His body by performing the various and distinctive operations of a human soul: nutritive life is shown by His dining with His disciples; sensitive life indicated by the fact that He sees and hears, for He greets His disciples and answers their questions; and finally, intellectual life is evident because He speaks concerning the Scriptures. The Risen Christ also shows that He has a divine nature as well, by accomplishing miracles through His own power.

There are, unfortunately, some people outside the Church who reject the Resurrection and all miracles as impossible. Reflection on their explanation discloses a demand for a more inconceivable miracle. They would have you believe that a man, suffering for hours physical and spiritual torture—a painful three-hour agony on the cross, His side pierced with a lance, His limp body bound in cloth and buried in a sealed tomb without food for days—would suddenly revive, and by His own strength roll away the heavy stone. He then appeared to hundreds of people, and mysteriously vanishing from human sight, he left behind followers who would convert the world.

The only other alternative for the rationalists—and an equally untenable one—is to deny the reliability of the Evangelists as recorders of history. Countless scholars have written volume after volume refuting in detail this charge of unreliability.

⁵ St. Luke, 24, 37-40.

It suffices for us to note that a careful reading of the Gospels shows conclusively the firm grasp that the Evangelists had on their subject-matter; their sincerity, too, is assured because they suffered punishment and even death for their convictions.

In conclusion, we need only to summarize. Certain signs of credibility are necessary that our faith be reasonable, and God, in His mercy and goodness, has given us these signs. The greatest of these signs or motives for belief is the Resurrection, whose existence is historically established. The Easter season is a pleasant and encouraging reminder of this each year.