

ALLELUIA! CHRIST IS RISEN!

Easter: The Most Important Day of the Year

There are many significant days in the Church's liturgical year, from the somber Ash Wednesday which begins the Lenten season to the joyous celebration of Our Lord's birth on Christmas Day. The most important day of the year, however, is Easter Sunday. On this day we celebrate Jesus Christ's triumphant resurrection from the dead after his crucifixion on Good Friday. By raising Jesus from the dead, God vindicated all of claims that Jesus had made during his public ministry about his divine nature and his identity as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls the resurrection of Jesus "the crowning truth of our faith" which "constitutes the confirmation of all Christ's works and teachings" and provides "the definitive proof of his divine authority."

What do we believe about Jesus's Resurrection?

In the words of the renowned Anglican biblical scholar N.T. Wright, Jesus – who was really and truly dead on Good Friday – was really and truly alive again on Easter Sunday. When the New Testament writers state that Jesus was raised from the dead, they are not using flowery, metaphorical language to suggest that Jesus's soul went to heaven or that the disciples had a warm, pleasant sense that he was somehow still with them in spirit after his death on the cross. The four Gospels and St. Paul all make it very clear that Jesus was restored to physical, bodily life. St. Luke tells us that when Jesus appeared to his disciples in the Upper Room on Easter Sunday evening, the disciples were frightened and thought that they were seeing a ghost. In order to convince them of the material nature of his risen body, Jesus invites them to touch the wounds in his hands and feet. He also eats a piece of baked fish in their presence (see Luke 24:36-42). Likewise, St. John's Gospel tells how Jesus encouraged "doubting" Thomas to touch the nail marks in his hands and feet and the wound in his side (John 20:27).

Why should we believe that it really happened?

Ever since Jesus rose from the dead, skeptics and opponents of Christianity have questioned whether the resurrection really happened as the first disciples claimed (see Matthew 28:11-15). Some people have argued that the followers of Jesus stole his body and made up the story of his resurrection in order to found the Church and gain power and glory. Other people claim that the disciples were so dejected at the death of Jesus that they made up the story as a kind of psychological "wish fulfillment." What should we make of these claims? First, it is important to remember that nearly all of the apostles and other close disciples of Jesus were put to death for their steadfast witness to Christ's divinity and his resurrection from the dead. It is true that the Church became a powerful institution many centuries after the resurrection, but her first members were a hated and persecuted minority in the Roman Empire. Inventing the story of Jesus's resurrection was hardly the way to "win friends and influence people" in the Roman world of the 1st century! Second, such skeptical charges as these cannot account for the conversion of St. Paul. Paul was a zealous Jew belonging to the Pharisee sect who violently persecuted Christians until he encountered the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. This encounter transformed Paul from a hardened enemy of the Christian movement to one of the Church's most ardent and successful missionaries. It was this same Paul who would later write, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:17).

What does the resurrection of Jesus mean for us?

Each Sunday when we recite the Nicene Creed at Mass, we conclude by saying, “I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” Do we really look forward to our own resurrection? Many well-meaning Christian believers tend to assume that our ultimate goal is to “go to heaven” when we die. While it is true that we hope that our souls will go to be with God at the time of our death, this is not our final destiny. We are not meant to spend eternity as disembodied spirits (nor do we become angels when we die!). This way of thinking owes more to the Greek philosopher Plato than to St. Peter or St. Paul. God’s ultimate plan is to raise us to eternal, bodily life as he raised his Son Jesus. In his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul makes this point very clear when he says that Jesus Christ “will change our lowly body to conform to his glorified body” (Phil 3:21). In other words, we will get our bodies back when Christ returns to earth in glory at the end of time. Our resurrected bodies will be like Jesus’s risen body – material and physical, but never again subject to pain, suffering, and death.

What does the resurrection of Jesus mean for creation?

If we are to spend eternity in our resurrected bodies, where will this eternal life take place? Once again, there are many sincere believers who think that when Jesus Christ returns in glory, he will take us away to heaven and destroy the earth. This is not what the Bible tells us, however. The Scriptures are clear that God intends to bring about a new creation, a “new heaven and a new earth” (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). In a beautiful passage in his letter to the Romans, St. Paul explains that all of creation is destined to share in the “freedom of the children of God,” a freedom that we will attain when we are raised from the dead (Romans 8:18-25). The late Catholic theologian and liturgical scholar Adrien Nocent once wrote: “All created things, animate and inanimate, and indeed the universe in its entirety...have been redeemed. Salvation embraces the whole of creation.” Likewise, Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) spoke of the importance of this concept when he said, “By announcing a new heaven and a new earth, the Bible makes it clear that the whole of creation is destined to become part of God’s glory. All of created reality is to be drawn into blessedness.” Just as the belief that we will be given our bodies back at the resurrection should motivate us to care for our bodies and use them properly in this present life, so the fact that the earth and everything in it will one day share in our resurrected life should prompt us to exercise proper care and stewardship over the natural world.

A Time to Celebrate and Give Thanks

Each year the Church gives us forty days during Lent to reflect on our relationship with God and to seek God’s help in rooting out areas of sinfulness in our lives. For many Catholics, Lent is a time of extra spiritual devotion – and this is a great thing. However, the Church also give us *fifty* days during the Easter season to celebrate Christ’s triumph over death and to ponder how his resurrection gives us hope for everlasting life. Perhaps this year we might consider extending the spiritual practices we began during Lent – daily Mass attendance, Bible reading, etc. – into the fifty days of Easter, no longer in a spirit of penance but out of thanksgiving for the great love God has shown us by raising his Son from the dead.

Dr. Stephen Fahrig, S.T.D. is a professor of Sacred Scripture and associate academic dean at Saint John’s Seminary, adjunct professor of Old Testament at Pope St. John XXIII National Seminary, and a parishioner at St. Paul Parish in Harvard Square, where this reflection first appeared.

www.sjs.edu/lent