

Resurrection appearances

Acts 9:1-6 (7-20); John 21:1-19

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter

One of the important world events they used to teach you about in school happened in 49 B.C. when Caesar crossed the Rubicon. It was what we call “burning your bridges.” You can’t go back. You’re committed for better or worse. We still use that expression. And it is understood that this is one of those “facts of history.”

That’s what we’re really asking when we look at resurrection appearances of Jesus: What are facts? What is historical proof? How do we sort that out?

The same thing is true with other historical figures. There’s a lot of debunking today about historical figures. As the saying goes: No man is a hero to his valet.

What is historical truth? We have these witnesses to the resurrection that we have to deal with.

We have to remember that there’s a huge difference between the world of science and math and the world of history.

The world of math is an abstract world. Math rests on a few axioms, that is, unprovable assumptions. It has its own ways of sorting fact from error.

When this is applied to the world of science, what’s different is that you can repeat things and test them in the laboratory, although curiously, the implications of quantum mechanics for the nature of reality are still hotly contested.

An astronomer has said: “Things are stranger than the strangest thing you can imagine, even stranger than science fiction.” That’s the world of science and math.

History is different. History changes. In the world of history, we have what is called historical method to sort fact from fiction. We have rules of evidence in law. We ask: What is reasonable doubt?

Let’s come back to the resurrection.

In Germany about 70 years ago there were two Lutheran professors who had a discussion. One named Pannenberg said: “You can prove the resurrection by history.” That has never been very persuasive because people have said: “What kind of proof is this?”

A lesser known but more important professor named von Campenhausen said: “If you take the historical method, you can show that he really died, the tomb was empty, and it had an enormous effect on people.”

It is just as true to say that about the resurrection as it is to say that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. We don't have any video evidence. We don't have any way of really knowing. After all, that river changes. They don't even know exactly where that place was in 49 B.C.

We ask ourselves: What about these witnesses to the resurrection? What happened? Here today we have this account in the 9th chapter of Acts about Paul.

According to this account, Paul saw the resurrected Lord. What they don't tell you this account is again told in the 22nd chapter of Acts. Then it's again told in the 26th chapter of Acts. Each account is slightly different. This, of course, is Luke writing in the Book of Acts.

When Paul writes about this, as he does in Galatians 1 and 2 Corinthians 12, again it's somewhat different. Finally, in 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrection chapter, when he lists the witnesses, Paul says Christ first appeared to Peter, then to the twelve, then to more than 500 at one time, then to James and all the apostles, and then: "Last of all, to one untimely born, he appeared also to me" (1 Corinthians 15:8).

What is that about? If you go to 1 John 1:1-5 it refers to the one whom we have seen, the one whom we have heard, the one whom we have touched. You recall in the 20th chapter of John, Mary Magdalene saw him and heard him and touched him.

What do we say to this? Are these "witnesses" those who had day dreams, who saw ghosts, hallucinations? A kind of wishful thinking? An unexplained happening? Consider for example, the phenomenon of visions of the Virgin Mary:

In 1917, an apparition of the Virgin Mary appeared to three children in Fatima, Portugal. In 1981, an apparition of Mary appeared to six children in Medjugorje, Bosnia.

There is the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, an icon of Mary renowned for military and healing miracles associated with it.

In 1531, an apparition of Mary allegedly appeared to a peasant in Guadalupe, Mexico although historically we are able to establish that there is in fact no evidence for it. The person whom they claim was the witness never existed.

One could go on and on listing sites of Marian apparitions and shrines and the signs and miracles associated with these sites. The Vatican has an official process for evaluating the authenticity of Marian visions and miracles. Regardless of their findings, these shrines attract millions of devout visitors every year who come to pay homage and pray for miracles.

How do we sort this out? What are witnesses to the resurrection?

In order to get at that question, we can go to Acts just beyond our text for today, to Acts 10:40-41 where it says: “God raised him on the third day, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses.”

What does that mean? In those 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension, if you put up security cameras throughout Jerusalem, they wouldn’t show anything. Why?

Because, as it says: “God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”

You may recall in the 6th chapter of John that whole discussion about the feeding of the 5,000. Remember it says that everybody went away, everybody left except the Twelve.

Then it says in John 6:44 and 65: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him . . . no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

Jesus only appears to those whom he has chosen. It’s not something we do, not something we figure out.

What is going on here? We’re dealing with something that is more than any of our ways of thinking, more than any of our categories. It explodes all of our categories of proof, fact, truth, and evidence. It is other than that.

The cross is something that explodes, that scandalizes us. But so is the resurrection. It is something beyond and more than our thinking.

We must also see that we are caught in sin and death. We are caught by our broken thinking, our changing thinking. Our changing wills are nothing to depend on. We’re unable. We can’t and we don’t.

Luther has put it so neatly: “It’s outside of us, in spite of us.” That is, in spite of our sin and death. And, outside of us—it doesn’t depend on our thinking, our deciding, thank God.

That’s why the account in the Gospel today is remarkable for us. There’s this fish story. They go fishing, and then there’s someone on the shore who tells them to try again, and they get this huge catch of fish, and they know how incredibly unusual this was. He calls them: “Come and have breakfast.” None of them dared ask: “Who are you?” Because they knew it was the Lord.

That’s like the account in Luke 24 about the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus. A stranger joins them. They don’t know who he is, but they walk and talk, and when evening comes, they stop in a village and he joins them for supper. Finally, as it says in Luke 24:35: “They knew him in the breaking of the bread.”

He comes to us in a way that's different from us and brings us something that we don't have. We're caught in sin and death and our limits. He brings us, through his word, this visible word, life forever. Amen.