

16 April 2016

Following the Risen Christ: Easter 4 (Matthew 28: 1-10)

Sarah Bachelard

We're spending some time, in this season of Easter, exploring how it is that Jesus' resurrection is the foundation of our faith. Last week, we looked at what it means (or could mean) for us to believe that Jesus has been raised from death. This week, I want to say some more about learning to follow the risen Christ.

Let's begin with a brief recap. In telling the story of the resurrection, the gospel narratives insist on two happenings. The first is that the disciples experience in various ways that Jesus is no longer dead. The tomb is discovered to be empty; they are encountered by One whom they (often with some difficulty) identify as Jesus himself, crucified and now risen. The second is that this encounter transforms them – they are addressed in the depths of their need, despair, guilt and fear, and called into renewed relationship as they are liberated to follow in his way. They are changed, as James Alison says, from 'pusillanimous fisherfolk into international heroes and martyrs'. Over time, they will be caused to 'rethink the whole of their lives, their relationship with their homeland, their culture, its values, and ... their understanding of who God is'.¹

Modern discussions of the resurrection often focus on only one dimension of this testimony. On the one hand, much ink has been spilt on the question of whether Jesus' resurrection from the dead 'really' happened, and on discussing the historical and scientific evidence for and against its plausibility. But, as well as the fact that this kind of evidence is pretty much unavailable, the problem with this approach by itself is that it doesn't address the 'so what' question. Even if it could be proved, the mere 'fact' of a physical resurrection wouldn't be enough to generate faith. That's because our sense of the meaning and significance of this event is necessarily connected to

¹ James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1994), p.7.

the difference it makes in the disciples' lives, and the way of life it calls forth from them.

On the other hand, however, attempts by some modern writers to *explain* the resurrection stories solely in terms of the disciples' experience – as if the resurrection represents nothing more than *their* renewed sense of life and purpose – also seem unsatisfactory. This is because, as Rowan Williams says, 'What belief in the [physical] resurrection affirms is something other than the authority of witnesses'.² In other words, the tradition that Jesus has been raised, the tradition of the empty tomb is 'part of the Church's resource in resisting the temptation to "absorb" Jesus into itself ... Jesus is not the possession of the community ... because he is alive ...'.³ He remains other to the community of believers – one who continues to call and judge them.

This sense of the irreducibility of the risen Jesus, his otherness to the community of disciples, is reflected in many of the resurrection stories. It's there in John's gospel – when Christ tells Mary Magdalene 'Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father'. It's there in Luke when he withdraws from the disciples' sight – first after the meal at Emmaus, and later when he's 'carried up to heaven'. It's in Mark and in tonight's reading from Matthew's gospel, when the first news of the resurrection is communicated in the angel's words: 'He is not here ... He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him' (Matthew 28: 6-7). First the tomb is empty; just when they think Jesus has become an object, containable, a corpse to anoint – he is not there. And then, even when he returns, it's as though he remains beyond them, ahead of them. The risen Jesus keeps on creating absences, spaces – spaces into which the disciples are called to step if they are to continue to follow and be led by him.

This is what resurrection faith is. It's the willingness to follow Jesus into unknowing, and to keep following even if the way looks as though it will take us through loss, disgrace, meaninglessness and annihilation, entrusting ourselves

² Rowan Williams, 'Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.183-196, p.190.

³ Williams, 'Between the Cherubim', p.192.

without reserve to the mystery of the paschal journey. But why is this so? And how does it matter?

Let me say something first about the significance of the call to step into an empty space, to follow one who has gone ahead of us to Galilee. I used to be most indignant about this. Why is Jesus so elusive, so hard to pin down? Why doesn't God make it all more obvious? Wouldn't it be a better world if there were no room for doubt about who God is and what God requires of us? Why bother with a revelation that's almost no revelation at all, a risen Christ half-glimpsed by a few frightened witnesses and then immediately withdrawn?

Well, more and more it seems to me that these stories induct us into the necessary dynamic of discipleship and transformation. Something happens, something is effected *in us* by the process of having to live by faith and not by sight, by being asked 'follow' without really knowing what it's all about or where we're going. And it seems that this necessary 'something' can be wrought in no other way.

Partly, this is about learning humility. If we are to come to know God, we have to discover that God is beyond our knowing. God is not an idea we have, a doctrine or set of rules we master, but a reality which always exceeds us, beckons us, draws us out beyond ourselves and our familiar context, our sense of what we control. We must know and accept our dependence, our poverty, our need. And this knowledge, this acceptance of our dependence forms us for the deep listening that is true obedience. We're no longer relying on ourselves, we no longer have the illusion we can 'make it' on our own – and so we listen as if our lives depend on it – which indeed they do. More and more, we have no desire to be or do what is not first given us to be and do – we are learning to live responsively, as 'hearers' of the Word. And this is how we are transformed; this is how we become bearers of God's life in the world. As Laurence Freeman says: 'Obedience is not doing what you're told but becoming the Word you hear'.

All this requires, however, a deep and frightening surrender of control – and for many of us, certainly for me, this was a step that for a long time I couldn't take. For a while it was as if I didn't know how. And then, at a certain point, I became

present to some mechanism deep within me that was frightened and resisting, that was in the way of my unconditional 'yes'. Even after I'd recognized it, I was unable to dissolve that resistance myself even though I wanted to. At such a point, I think, all we can do is acknowledge that we're stuck, still resisting and hanging on to a security of our own, at levels we can't ourselves undo. We must wait then, like the disciples waited in the upper room, or Mary waited at the tomb, for Jesus, for grace to come to us. One day, he comes; one day, we give our yes.

Having made this act of trust, we experience the centre of gravity in our own lives differently. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein expressed this experience as well as anyone, when he said that living from faith is as if you 'no longer rest your weight on the earth but suspend yourself from heaven. Then *everything* will be different and it will be 'no wonder' if you can do things that you cannot do now'. And he adds: '(A man who is suspended looks the same as one who is standing, but the interplay of forces within him is nevertheless quite different, so that he can act quite differently than a standing man.)'⁴

That seems to have been the disciples' experience of life in the wake of the resurrection, as they followed their glimpse of the risen Jesus into a future they could never have imagined. The 'interplay of forces' within them was quite different – they were sourced in listening, in their responsiveness to God. And this is how they became witnesses of the resurrection – because in them, the nature of God was becoming more visible; through them, God's reconciling purpose was being realized.

And that's our call too – to follow where we are led, to dare entrust our whole lives to this rumour of love and so surprisingly to discover in ourselves a living and responsive faith. This living faith, as a beautiful passage from the Letter to the Hebrews expresses it, is 'is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb. 11:1). It's the gift made available as Jesus goes ahead of us, creating new spaces for us to live in, new possibilities for us to embody. Thanks be to God.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 33e.