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### **Coming to Believe (John 20. 19-31)**

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In Chapter 20 of John's gospel there are four vignettes of resurrection – four brief scenes offered as testimony that Jesus has been raised from the dead. There's Mary Magdalene's pre-dawn discovery of the stone rolled away from the tomb and the race between two disciples (Peter and the 'other' disciple) to verify her report. This scene involves a rather elaborate description of which disciple got there first, the order in which they entered the tomb, and their progressively deepening perception of the discarded grave clothes and their significance. The second scene involves Mary, who remains weeping at the tomb after the two men have 'returned to their homes'. She, looking inside and seeing yet more, recognises angels sitting in the place where the body of Jesus had been laid, and then someone she mistakes for a gardener, who turns out to be the risen Jesus himself addressing her by name.

Our gospel reading today picks up at the third scene, which takes place on the evening of this same day, the 'first day of the week'. Here a larger group of disciples is huddled behind locked doors and suddenly the risen Lord is standing in the midst of them, proclaiming his peace and breathing upon them the Holy Spirit. And the fourth scene, in the same room and a week later, involves Jesus appearing again to the disciples – this time with Thomas present, being relieved of his doubt by the invitation physically to touch Jesus' hands and his side.

Each of these vignettes is saturated with theological significance. There's Mary Magdalene's 'turning' three times before she recognises Jesus in the garden – which suggests that to perceive the risen One involves some kind of transformation or conversion of the self. In today's reading, Jesus has come to the gathered community despite the locked doors, indicating that he is no longer constrained by the limits of

ordinary human life and empowers the disciples to live likewise beyond the limits previously set by death, fear and guilt. The encounter with Thomas emphasises that the risen Jesus is indeed the crucified Jesus – no mere disembodied spirit, and also provides the occasion for what scholar Raymond Brown calls the ‘supreme Christological pronouncement of the Fourth Gospel’.<sup>1</sup> For the first time, in the words attributed to Thomas, who calls Jesus ‘My Lord and my God!’, Jesus is explicitly identified *as* God.<sup>2</sup> It is the climax of John’s whole gospel. So with amazing economy and vividness, these vignettes convey the density and richness of the resurrection encounter, and its meaning for human life.

Even so, what’s striking about this gospel’s proclamation of resurrection is just how fragile, how vulnerable it is. The resurrection event and the disciples’ witness to it is the foundation of Christian faith. And it reshapes, so our tradition claims, the whole foundation for human life. The old limit of human life – death – is revealed not to be ultimate. The ancient pattern of human violence and the sacrifice of the one for the many, is shown to have nothing to do with God, and no power to alter God’s way of being towards us – which we see in the risen Christ to be limitlessly peaceable, limitlessly forgiving and hospitable.

The resurrection means that we ourselves can learn to *be* this way – like Christ. We no longer have to source our identities defensively – afraid of death, afraid of shame, afraid of condemnation and the ‘powers of darkness’. Instead we can live boldly, freely and generously, upheld and immersed in the same boundless energy of love in which Jesus himself lived and moved and had his being. Jesus has undergone all the fear and violence that distorts and deforms our world, in order to show us that they are not the last word and so to loosen their grip on us and how we live. We are invited to entrust ourselves to this revelation of the true nature of

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<sup>1</sup> Francis J. Molony, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina Series Vol.4 (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 537.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 1188.

things, to 'believe' (as John puts it), and so to participate in what Paul rightly calls 'a new creation'. This is indeed Good News!

But how does God communicate this truth, this new possibility for human life? How does God begin to make it known? Not with the risen Jesus turning up, unmistakably himself, to rebuke Caiaphas and Pilate and the others who condemned him; not with the eruption of mega-church rallies at the Colosseum or in Jerusalem, but on an almost absurdly, laughably small scale. Its first intimation is the unexplained and mute emptiness of the tomb, one or two disciples peering in and seeing some discarded grave clothes. There's a woman beyond hope, weeping at the tomb, met by someone she barely recognises. There's a small and fearful group huddled behind closed doors, in whose midst Jesus suddenly appears, then disappears and then returns a week later – again without explanation or seeming strategy (no very efficient marketing here) – to speak directly to Thomas's condition. In the early preaching of the resurrection, recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter acknowledges precisely this small-scale, intimate communication when he tells the Gentile Cornelius that God raised Jesus on the third day 'and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead' (Acts 10.41).

So what's going on here? What does this manner of communicating the resurrection show us about the Christian life, the kind of life we're being invited into?

For one thing, it seems consistent with the way God acts all along. The centre is made visible at the edges, in virtual obscurity and hiddenness. The people chosen to be a blessing to the world are a small Semitic tribe, criss-crossing the desert in search of home; the Son of God is born under a cloud, to an unlikely couple in an outpost of the Roman Empire; and now, these first intimations of resurrection, of the re-foundation of the very basis of life, are given to a handful of frightened followers who have thus far proved themselves less than reliable in the task of transforming the world. Talk about risk. And that's before we get involved! When God invites our

participation in the very project of creation and redemption, it seems set up to be maximally vulnerable – ever at risk of collapsing altogether.

And all this suggests that there is something about who God is and what God is doing among us that is *unable* to be communicated by means that are too secure, safe, or certain. There's a tenderness in divine life and so in the Christian life, a sense of exposure – which is missed by those muscular Easter hymns that speak so insistently of victory, triumph and overcoming. Yes – resurrection transforms death and fear – but not in the sense of a triumphal army moving in with boots on to secure some kind of impregnable position. It's more like the dawn of a new freedom to be. Received as gift, never conquered, grasped or controlled as possession. It comes when we least expect it, in our emptiness, our nothingness; comes as an inexhaustible whisper – God's still, small voice, the gradual yet potent realisation of being called by name, of being given a voice, a life, a vocation.

Resurrection life – *our* life in the wake of Easter Day – does not guarantee security or impregnability, some kind of free pass from the pain and difficulties of life in the world. It's not about being assured of our righteousness and virtue, a self-possessed 'salvation'. But it does offer the possibility of being met in the midst of our doubt, confusion and grief by a presence which, for all its vulnerability is also radically transforming, and of becoming bearers of this same fragile yet insistent life in the world – witnesses of the God who in the words of St Paul, 'gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist' (Rom. 4.17).