

Making Sense of Something That Doesn't

Luke 24:1-12

Let me begin with a little interactive response. I'd like a show of hands if you agree with the following statements:

I don't know.

I don't know
about life after death.

I don't know
about life after death,
but daily I make the choice to believe.

I don't know
about life after death,
but daily I make the choice to believe
passionately in life before death. ¹

There's no intended trick or riddle to this, nor is there a reward for responding to these statements. It's just a "nested meditation" used to recognize there are varying ways that people of faith wrestle through something as fundamental to Christian theology as a belief in the afterlife (or, more specific to Easter, the resurrection of Jesus). Though some of you might expect me to scold you for admitting your closeted agnosticism, I actually appreciate your honesty and candor, as you will come to see. Still, it takes a brave soul to sit in church on Easter Sunday and face the possibility that, even on a bright, sunny morning as this, you might be struck by lightning as a quick way to find out the answer!

¹ Kevin Anderson, *Divinity in Disguise: Nested Meditations to Delight the Mind and Awaken the Soul*, CLB Press, 2003, pg. 168.

I'm only kidding, of course, and with good reason because, frankly, it's not an easy task for me to stand up here and preach dogmatically on something that doesn't make sense to many people. I'm not referring to the afterlife, per se, since that is a commonly-held, and even rational, belief held by both religious and non-religious people, based mainly on our human instincts for survival; we don't like to imagine death to be our ultimate end—there has to be something more, we logically assume.

What makes my task challenging, though, is to explain our entrance into that eternal realm in terms of a bodily resurrection, which is what New Testament writers imply is what occurred with Jesus. Though Christians the world over proclaim the resurrection as a foundational doctrine of the faith, virtually no one, even the Gospel writers themselves, can explain it well enough to satisfy skeptics, even those among the faithful. In spite of the central role that the Easter story has in Christian theology, there is no incontrovertible, empirical proof of the resurrection of Jesus other than a reported missing body and a number of inconsistent anecdotes from early supporters and later testaments. Under any other set of circumstances, for some other religion, let's say, we might question the veracity of the claim; it's not the sort of thing that would make an irrefutable case in court, let alone singularly validate the theology of the largest, most expansive, religion in the history of the world.

I hate to be a party pooper, especially on a happy, colorful, religious holiday like this. But we must be honest: the resurrection is an extremely difficult claim to verify and grasp, since it's beyond the realm of human experience. I can't prove to you that it ever

happened, or deny that the weight of historical probability stands against it. The nay-sayers have compelling reasons to turn us all into doubting Thomases. The Easter story, proclaimed with such a huge *exclamation mark* within the church, is viewed with an equally large *question mark* for those outside of it! The claim of a bodily resurrection can be debated vigorously, as it has been down through the ages. However, the bottom line is, it's impossible to prove or disprove, particularly when we are trying to reconstruct an event which occurred 2,000 years ago.

Therefore, with so much riding on so little proof, is claiming, "I don't know," unreasonable? Why wouldn't it be justified, given the reasonable doubts reasonable people can have? More than that, I would submit to you that it may be the most honest, rational, and spiritually *faithful* response we can make, even as deeply committed Christians! Maybe doubting Thomas was onto something!

Now this may offend your sensibilities, since it seems a bit out of line with the proclamation of Easter, but I assure you it isn't. I recall an old axiom that goes like this: "Only the truly faithful dare to question their faith." Faith and doubt are not rivals, they are necessary allies. Doubt is not necessarily destructive to faith; on the contrary, it can be the springboard for search and discovery; it is the motivation for trying to make sense of that which doesn't. Doubt forces us to wrestle with that which we don't understand or cannot embrace. A serious exploration of faith, I think, requires us to question even our most fundamental beliefs on occasion, because to truly own them, we have to address the shadows of doubt that invariably exist within them.

Religious beliefs, in particular, have many shadows of doubt. Otherwise, we'd be referring to them as historical "facts," instead of "beliefs." Beliefs and facts are two different things: facts are objective, verifiable events that occur in life; beliefs are what we extrapolate from them or how we choose to interpret them. If facts aren't substantiated to our satisfaction, then what we believe has to be examined and revised as well, or else we become lazy in our thinking or blind in our beliefs. Beliefs, religious or otherwise, are meant to be *truth-tested*, so that they are based in reality and not in some delusion or fantasy.

When I examine the resurrection stories, such as the one here in Luke, I have to ask, why were they told as part of the Jesus story? Is it simply because the Gospel writers were describing the story as it happened? Were they reporting the "facts" as they knew them—facts that would be evident and irrefutable to others, especially those who weren't Christian sympathizers? The answer is, we don't know. If the stories were completely consistent across the board, it would seem more likely that what we have in the Gospel accounts is a certain amount of evidence pointing to an objective truth: Jesus of Nazareth has risen from the dead. A fact that can't be disputed.

But, instead, there is no such consistency. If you line up the four Gospel accounts side-by-side, what's obvious is not the similarities, but rather the differences in details. What seems to be consistent between the four Gospels is that on the morning after the Sabbath, the followers of Jesus discovered his tomb was empty. In at least two of the four, the initial assumption is something's wrong: someone has taken the body of Jesus. Eventually, though, the empty

tomb became evidence of Jesus' resurrection. Except, that isn't irrefutable evidence. An empty tomb doesn't prove anything. You can believe that it means Jesus has risen from the dead, or you can believe something else.

A very plausible scenario has been made that Joseph of Arimathea, who is attributed with taking the body of Jesus and placing it in his family tomb late on Friday at the beginning of the Sabbath at sundown, simply reburied the body elsewhere after the Sabbath on Saturday evening, hours before Mary Magdalene and others came to anoint him Sunday morning. The argument made is based on sound reasoning, which includes raising doubt about Joseph's sympathies with Jesus, especially since he was a member of the Sanhedrin that actually condemned him to death. Luke tries to explain it away, but many historians and some biblical scholars among others doubt the veracity of that claim. But then again, what they propose is only a hypothesis—an educated guess—an interpretation of events, which amounts to nothing more than a belief. Belief versus belief.

The point is, this can be argued around and around on both sides without resolution, because the facts, such as they are, can be interpreted in differing ways. What a person chooses to believe ultimately isn't an incontrovertible fact; it's a belief, an interpretation of the evidence—a belief that should be truth-tested as much as possible.

So if the story of Jesus' bodily resurrection can never be proven beyond the shadow of a doubt, why then was it told and why does it ultimately matter?

I would argue this: how we choose to interpret the evidence doesn't matter nearly as much as, what does it mean to us? What we choose to do with this part of the Jesus story is up to us; it's our belief—ours to wrestle with based on the evidence. It's not up to traditional doctrine to dictate and define what we'll believe. How we choose to understand it will be shaped by what is meaningful to us at a particular time in our life. There is no single, standard, and definitive way to appreciate the meaning of resurrection that can be then construed as universal, or timeless, or orthodox within the Christian faith. The basic evidence alone doesn't justify it; it doesn't amount enough to impose a judgment beyond a reasonable doubt. That's why the value of the resurrection of Jesus doesn't just lie in its historical verification.

Instead, we are to ask, what are the meaningful aspects of these stories we can embrace—that gives us a reason to believe—that ring with truth and make sense to us as individuals and as communities of faith? Where do our hearts lead us to embrace resurrection as a meaningful experience of faith? Which stories intrigue us most, or what characters or moments touch us in a deeply spiritual way?

Is it the fact that women are the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection—women, who in that day, were not considered reliable witnesses in a patriarchal world? What does that mean to be disregarded by humans, yet divinely trusted and elevated in status? Is that not a form of redemption—a new life for women in an ancient man's world—a new confidence for anyone who has been devalued and marginalized by their “superiors”?

Or do you find meaning when Jesus comforts Mary in her tears and fears, almost intimately, after she mistook him for a gardener? What does it mean to be sympathetically consoled and embraced by a divine presence in a moment of unrelenting sorrow? Is that not a source of hope for those who mourn?

Can you find meaning in the confusion and doubts of Thomas, who was struggling for truth, amidst the apparent emotional hysteria of those around him? Was it not okay to doubt without being criticized for it?

Or is meaning found in the ecstatic, almost shameless, joy of Peter, scrambling out of the water in Galilee, once he realized his departed mentor and friend was awaiting him on the beach, even though he had denied any association with him when his life was on the line? How is that not a confirmation of second chances in life, or that love can cover over a multitude of sins?

Or maybe you are like Paul the Apostle, whose life was completely turned around when he came to believe the risen Jesus as the source of divine forgiveness and hope for all! Or if you are one who has faced your own mortality, how can you not find hope in one lived beyond the grave—one who illustrates life continues to exist even after death? There are places of meaning for each of us in all of these varied stories and beliefs.

It's not just for us who read these stories recorded in the Bible. For many Judeans in those initial days, the message of Jesus' *bodily* resurrection would have stirred their hearts, for that was the great hope for martyrs and those who perished in the war that eventually destroyed Jerusalem, particularly rebels whose bodies were typically

dismembered and desecrated by Roman torturers. To have the promise of redemption and a restored body in the promised resurrection was a great mercy, ever longed for! Or those who saw in Jesus' death and resurrection their own hope that the innocent, wrongly accused and executed by the dominant powers of their day, would find some ultimate redemption by the hand of God! Divine justice was evident to them in this proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead! The Roman cross was not the final end.

Again, where do people find meaning in these stories? We embrace and believe what is true to us—what speaks to us in our own needs and experience. What's meaningful to one person may not be to another. But are they not all true as a source of meaning and hope? The most important lesson from Easter is this: How do the stories of resurrection speak to our lives and to our world and to our times? Find your own meaning from it and let that shape what you truly believe.

Ultimately, the facts present themselves: the pre-Easter Jesus was a very extraordinary human being, viewed by his contemporaries and followers in a variety of ways: as a Jewish mystic, a religious reformer, a social prophet, an amazing healer, a wisdom teacher, as the Messiah—a man with the heart and spirit of God. The post-Easter Jesus, however, became so much more to those who believed in him, not just because they claimed God raised him from the dead, but because in his story, they found their own places of redemption and their hope for life itself.

That's what makes sense for a story which, for the most part, doesn't. It's what makes Easter so believable and so important to

human survival. It's a day affirming our greatest hope. For believers and doubters alike, this alone may be the best reason of all to take it to heart.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
31 March 2013