

## WHY THE RESURRECTION MAKES A DIFFERENCE<sup>1</sup>

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Third Sunday of Easter, 14 April 2024

**Christ is risen! Alleluia!**

If you have been to Jerusalem, you will have visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Eastern Christians prefer to call it the Church of the Resurrection. Does this difference matter? In an indirect way, that's the subject of this sermon: "Why the resurrection makes a difference".

The two names of the Jerusalem church hint at a difference in approaches between Western and Eastern Christianity. In the west, we concentrate more on the death of Jesus. In the east they concentrate more on the resurrection. It's not that each neglects the other, but that there is a subtle difference. The decoration of the respective church buildings hints at this varying emphasis. In the west, the interior is dominated by a cross or crucifix. In those churches where the cross has no body, the argument usually is that Christ is risen. Nevertheless, the symbol remains that of his death rather than that of his new life. In the east, the most prominent sight is the iconostasis, the screen of icons, behind which is the sanctuary with its altar and that is where the crucifix will be, mostly out of sight. The intention of the iconostasis is to give us a vision of heaven. It does this by presenting us with images of prophets, apostles, and saints, that is, the community of faith, the church, both here on earth and beyond it.

We need at this point to say what the resurrection is not. An Orthodox website puts it this way:

Resurrection, however, does not simply mean bodily resuscitation. Neither the Gospel nor the Church teaches that Jesus was lying dead and then was biologically revived and walked around in the same way that He did before He was killed. In a word, the Gospel does not say that the angel moved the stone from the tomb in order to let Jesus out. The angel moved the stone to reveal that Jesus was not there (Mk 16; Mt 28).<sup>2</sup>

We might contrast this with the raising of Lazarus, where the stone was moved precisely to let him out.<sup>3</sup> The site goes on to tell some of the ways in which the risen Christ differs from the pre-death Jesus. We have heard some of them in this morning's gospel. That Jesus showed his wounds is partly about his resurrection being real. The idea of a god who was reborn was quite familiar to the ancient world. Agricultural gods died every winter and rose again in spring. If Jesus had conformed to that popular myth, he would have come back whole, no wounds, all suffering erased. In that case, we would know that the whole thing has been a charade; a deity disguised as a pretend person appears to suffer but, hey presto, it wasn't real, and the deity is restored as good as new. The wounded Christ shows that this has been no charade. James Alison puts it this way:

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Acts 3:12-20; Psalm 4; 1 John 2:15-17, 3:1-6; Luke 24:36b-48

<sup>2</sup> [The Orthodox Faith - Volume I - Doctrine and Scripture - The Symbol of Faith - Resurrection - Orthodox Church in America \(oca.org\)](https://oca.org/)

<sup>3</sup> John 11

.. only that which is fragile, weak, precarious according to the order of this world is capable of allowing itself to be broken so as to be created anew. ... only that which is vulnerable can allow itself to be broken in order to be built up again.<sup>4</sup>

When Bishop Peter Carnley writes about the Resurrection, he talks not about proving it as a matter of fact, he speaks about the experience of it. When we hear the story of the so-called “Doubting” Thomas, we recognise that he did not actually touch Jesus’ wounds, he recognised the person whom he had known,

In an article for the Jesuit online journal, *Eureka Street*, Justine Toh comments:

In the Christian account of Easter, it is Jesus Christ, both fully man and fully God, who goes into the grave on Good Friday and rises to new and forever life on Easter [Day]. He promises not only the resurrection of the dead, but the undoing of every wrong and the perfection of everything right. ‘Behold, I make all things new,’ is Jesus’ bold claim.

But if ‘God is dead’, as the philosopher Nietzsche declared, [Holy] Saturday is our existential condition. We spend our days suspended between our regrets and fears, and wild hopes.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of such a suspended state, Rowan Williams suggests that the resurrection is necessary if we are to experience Jesus as contemporary. None of the things that we do as church, baptism, Eucharist, my preaching, would make any sense if we did not experience Jesus as a contemporary. He said:

If Jesus were not alive and contemporary we would read [the Bible] as an historical document, we wouldn’t read it listening for a word which would create a present encounter.<sup>6</sup>

The followers of Jesus imagined at first that his death had severed their relationship with him. That is the nature of death; it severs our relationships. But that is precisely what didn’t happen, and Easter Day is the proof. Instead, the resurrection of Jesus opened a whole new range of relationships. It transformed his disciples, empowering them to create a new society of which we are the inheritors.<sup>7</sup>

In a recent article for the ABC, Michael Jensen addresses the various conspiracy theories about the resurrection. One of them appears in the New Testament. Matthew says that the chief priests conspired with the soldiers guarding the tomb to say that the disciples stole his body away during the night. This conspiracy was still reported, Matthew says.<sup>8</sup> Another conspiracy theory says that the church invented the resurrection. Of this conspiracy, Jensen says:

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead was not created by the church to bolster its power. It was, evidently, the other way around. Resurrection is a claim, not of the oppressor, but of the oppressed. Before the resurrection disciples were terrified, hiding for fear that they would also be rounded up and killed as heretics, dissidents, and troublemakers. Afterwards, they preached with boldness, at great personal risk and for no personal profit.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> James Alison, *Raising Abel*, New York, Crossroad, 1996, p. 91

<sup>5</sup> Justine Toh, [The Easter immortality project \(eurekastreet.com.au\)](http://eurekastreet.com.au)

<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, *God With Us: The Meaning Of The Cross And Resurrection - Then And Now*, SPCK p. 58

<sup>7</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982, pp. 22-23, 60-61

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28: 11-15

<sup>9</sup> [Resurrections have consequences: Why conspiracy theories about Christianity are irresistible - ABC Religion & Ethics](#)

The truth is that the resurrection created the church.

Peter Carnley reminds us that one of the significant features of the resurrection faith is that it is not simply an intellectual assent to an argument put to us. In any case, we would most usually reject the argument on those terms. The original disciples believed because they knew themselves to be addressed by the risen one. He says:

It is essentially persons in whom one places one's trust in a religious sense. In resurrection faith, for example, we trust that Christ will be with us always, just as he promised.<sup>10</sup>

Even though we may think that we know all this, a mystery remains. Our reading from 1 John reminds us of what we do not know:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.<sup>11</sup>

This mystery is echoed by Kevin Hart's poem, "The Gift":

One day the gift arrives—outside your door,  
Left on a windowsill, inside the mailbox,  
Or in the hallway, far too large to lift.

Your postman shrugs his shoulders, the police  
Consult a statute, and the cat meows.  
No name, no signature, and no address,

Only, "To you, my dearest one, my all . . ."  
One day it all fits snugly on your lap,  
Then fills the backyard like afternoon in spring.

Monday morning, and it's there at work—  
Already ahead of you, or left behind  
Amongst the papers, files and photographs;

And were there lipstick smudges down the side  
Or have they just appeared? What a headache!  
And worse, people have begun to talk:

"You lucky thing!" they say, or roll their eyes.  
Nights find you combing the directory  
(A glass of straw-coloured wine upon the desk)

Still hoping to chance on a forgotten name.  
Yet mornings see you happier than before—  
After all, the gift has set you up for life.

Impossible to tell, now, what was given  
And what was not: slivers of rain on the window,

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Carnley, *The Reconstruction of Resurrection Belief*, Cascade Books, 2019, pp. 124-125.

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 3:1-2

Those gold-tooled Oeuvres of Diderot on the shelf,

The strawberry dreaming in a champagne flute—  
Were they part of the gift or something else?  
Or is the gift still coming, on its way?<sup>12</sup>

**Christ is risen! Alleluia!**

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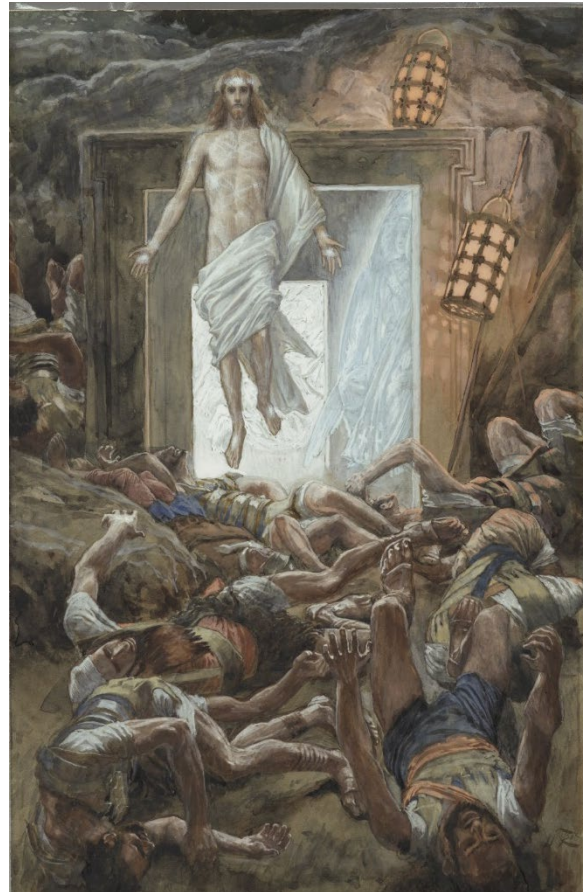
<sup>12</sup> [A Year of Being Here: Kevin Hart: "The Gift"](#)



Restored Tomb  
Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Resurrection)  
Jerusalem



*Anastasis (Resurrection)*, 11<sup>th</sup> Century  
Fresco, Chora Church, Istanbul



James Tissot (1836–1902)  
*The Resurrection (La Résurrection)*, 1886-1894.  
Brooklyn Museum