

Easter and the Empty Tomb

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Abstract: *While Easter faith is not in the empty tomb as such, the empty tomb has a pivotal role for Christian faith in the resurrection of Jesus. Either Christ has really risen or Christians are confronted with a dead and decaying corpse on which to base what would be a rather diluted resurrection faith. The empty tomb is not an idol of human projection but an indicator of God's Spirit transforming human freedom and the cosmos itself into a totally new reality: the "new heaven and new earth." Without an empty tomb, Christian eschatology degenerates into an ideology of wishful thinking and Easter becomes meaningless. The world is not a closed system or a vast graveyard with perhaps an inkling of some kind of afterlife; it is rather a garden in which the seeds of eternal life are already sprouting.*

Key Words: Jesus Christ – resurrection; empty tomb; Easter faith; resurrection of the body; eschatology; Jesus Christ – incarnation; hypostatic union

The biblical data regarding the resurrection of Jesus and his appearances to various witnesses includes a more ambiguous indicator, namely, the fact of the empty tomb. Its discovery is connected to a temporal reference to "the third day." There is also a personal connection as well, since "some women of our company" discovered it (Lk 24:23). How the confession of the resurrection is related to this tradition remains a complex question. On the one hand, it never was, either for the disciples, or for those who would profit from their testimony, that the reality of the resurrection was founded on the mere emptiness of the tomb. A vanished corpse is not the same as the Risen Lord. Nor does an unoccupied grave mean a transformed creation. Nevertheless, a decaying corpse is not a very convincing sign of Christ's victory over death or of the beginning of a new creation.

Beyond Silence and Emptiness

The discovery of the empty tomb initially gave rise only to perplexity and fear (cf. Mk 16:8; Lk 24:5, 11). The women, confronted with the absence of the dead body of Jesus in the tomb, were exposed to a new form of questioning, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Lk 24:5a). The sudden appearance of "the two men in dazzling clothes" who addressed the – at first perplexed, and then terrified – women with this question, and then with subsequent declaration, "He is not here, but has risen" (Lk 24:5b) indicate that the resurrection is a divinely-wrought event, all along the God-intended culmination of Jesus' mission: "Remember how he told you...that the Son of man must be handed over...crucified...and on the third day, rise again" (Lk 24:6-7).

What had taken place was not explicable in terms of the emptiness and silence of the tomb. Its only explanation was to be found elsewhere, in the transformative action of a love stronger than death. That would bring its own kind of silence, that of mute wonder

and joy when confronted by an event for which the world had no words. But before that, the women's first words reporting to the apostles what they had seen and heard had seemed "as an idle tale" (Lk 24:11), though it led to Peter running to the tomb, seeing the grave-clothes, and coming home "amazed" (Lk 24:12).

When that initial kind of silence, suspicion and amazement learned to speak in the full radiance of what had taken place, it will not be about the mere emptiness of the tomb. It will be the words of joyful witnesses to "these things" in which the power and mercy of God are manifest (Lk 24:45-49). The risen Jesus does not occur to his disciples as a striking presence within the conditions of the world in which he had been crucified. He does not return as a triumphant religious celebrity. He tells no tale of escaping from death, and so as imposing himself on gullible disciples – only to be found out by inevitable death. His exit from this world opens the way to another realm of relationships, unbounded by death, transforming human freedom to levels of joy, hope and courage that nothing else can explain. It commanded a waiting for Jesus to send the Spirit his Father had promised (Lk 24:49a): "stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (v. 49b). The empty tomb became a sign of promise. There is no implication that the early witnesses to the resurrection either haunted a grave or lingered among the dead. Rather, they were empowered to be witnesses within history to that fullness of life which in Christ had already been anticipated.

An Indicator of Excess

In this perspective, the empty tomb has its place in the salvific realism of the Gospel narrative. It is an indicator of the incalculable excess of the resurrection event. The otherwise blank fact of the empty tomb is lifted out of its original ambiguity. Its inclusion in the Gospel accounts prevents faith from fabricating idols of an idealist or mystical character. Indeed, if theology dismisses or bypasses the significance of the empty tomb, there are inevitable negative consequences. The reality of the resurrection would be left at the mercy of the kind of subjectivity that would prefer to be undisturbed by such an event. Christ's rising from the dead would tend quickly to become a nice thought in a world in which nothing had really changed; and in which the resurrection could not *really* happen. Eschatology would veer very quickly into an ideology. It would entice hope to trust in an exalted ideal, to the detriment of founding itself on a transforming divine event. Moreover, it would mean dismissing the special role of women in communicating the Gospel of new life.¹ After all, unless it was utterly sure of what it was reporting, the Gospel would hardly base its case on the testimony of women in a culture that scarcely accepted their credibility. Nor, for that matter, did either friend or foe pretend that the tomb contained the remains of Jesus. One Gospel writer at least is quite aware of the allegation that the corpse had been stolen – a quite predictable reaction on the part of those for whom, for whatever reason, Jesus had to stay dead and buried (Mt 28:1-15).

In this way, the empty tomb serves as an historical marker for a transcendent mystery. Right there, set within the history of human defeat and failure, is a demand for Christian faith to be defiantly full-bodied in its realism. The emptiness of the tomb shows the power of the Spirit to be a transcendent energy of world-shattering proportions. While the empty tomb can never substitute for Jesus' living presence, it inspires a keener awareness of the divinely transforming event that has occurred. It is, to

¹ See N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London : SPCK, 2003), 607-608.

use Marion's distinction, not an idol of human projection, but an icon, backlit by a light not of this world. Yet it leaves its trace in time and space and matter, thereby suggesting that there are far more surprises in store for the cosmos than scientifically predictable events can allow.

A Different Worldview

A seed of wonder and questioning has been sown in the ground of the material cosmos. A whole worldview is called into question. N. T. Wright makes the general point:

No wonder the Herods, the Caesars and the Sadducees of this world, ancient and modern, were and are eager to rule out all possibility of actual resurrection. They are, after all, staking a counter-claim on the real world. It is the real world that the tyrants and bullies (including intellectual and cultural tyrants and bullies) try to rule by force, only to discover that in order to do so they have to quash all rumours of resurrection, rumours that would imply that their greatest weapons, death and destruction, are not after all omnipotent.²

David Bentley Hart makes a similar point. Confronted with the empty tomb of the crucified Jesus, the powers that did away with him are made inescapably aware that they are not the forces that shape history:

In a sense, the resurrection is an aporia in the language of the powers, a sudden interruption of the story they tell, and the beginning of an entirely new beginning of the story of the world: this is perhaps nowhere more powerfully expressed than at the end of Mark...when the empty tomb reduced the women come to anoint Christ's body to speechlessness, an amazed inability to say what they have seen and heard.³

What is at stake is a whole world view. For the powers of the world that rule this side of death, the tombs of those who challenged them are signs of their power to impose an unquestionable rule. Perhaps these tombs will be eventually be permitted to be venerated as symbolic sites of what might have been, the places where dreams of better things and the bodies of these unworldly dreamers are confined. In the meantime, those who pretended to disturb the established world-order lie dead and buried – crushed, brought to nothing, shorn of all power to subvert the way things are. All is well. All the divisions that had been essential for the maintenance of a violent world-order are fixed in place, once these disturbers of the peace are buried, and their tombs remains secure: "The tomb, after all, is the symbol *par excellence* of metaphysical totality and of the mythos of cosmic violence."⁴

If the powers that govern the world through the threat of death dance on the graves of those who pretended to challenge them, the emptiness of this tomb is an indicator of fullness of life that a death-bound world could not allow. The world is not an enclosed totality. It points beyond every limit, whether accepted or imposed. To cite Hart again:

But it is just this limit that Christ, respecting no boundaries, crosses in absolute freedom. Christ's resurrection, insofar as its cardinal sign is an empty tomb, is quite the opposite of every form of Gnostic consolation, every scheme of salvation that merely surrenders creation to the rule of the powers while offering emancipation from the world and its travails.⁵

² Wright, *The Resurrection*, 737.

³ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 333.

⁴ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 334.

⁵ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 334-5.

The empty tomb focuses faith at the clear edge of a new world in the making. What is coming to be, what has begun with Jesus rising from this tomb, goes beyond all inconclusive imaginings, reducing the “real world” to the desperate projections of the way things are, and must so remain. An event is given within history, causing a deep turbulence in which all provision orders are destabilised: “The resurrection is a transgression of the categories of truth governing the world... Christ is a word that cannot be silenced; he can always lay his hand upon another and say, ‘I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore’ (Rev 1:18).”⁶

The past world is wrapt in a classic fateful melancholy. The inscription on the ancient tombstone read, *et in Arcadia ego* (“I too was once in Arcady”). Virgil expressed it with immemorial poignancy: *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt* (“tears are at the heart of reality and every mortal thing affects our way of thinking”). This kind of all-pervading sadness is never far from the coercive power of violence to deprive life of hope. Yet both the defeats of melancholy and the pretensions of violence stand under the divine judgment of life to the full:

Because of the resurrection, it is impossible to be reconciled to coercive or natural violence, to ascribe its origins to fate or cosmic order, to employ it prudentially; as difficult as it may be to accept, all violence, all death, stands under judgment, as that which God has or will overcome. The resurrection defies all human expectations, but especially as it deprives thought of the consolations of the tragic.⁷

To all despairing attitudes and desperate systems that diminish hope and undermine the assurance of love to transform the world in accord with peace and justice, the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and his empty tomb are a stupefying scandal. It now “marks a boundary beyond which God has passed in Christ without allowing the beauty of his gift to be consumed by the indeterminate.”⁸ Every effort of thought to give meaning to death “has been surpassed by an infinite gesture, by the disorienting rhetoric of the empty tomb, by the radiance of the resurrection, and by the palpable wounds of the crucified.”⁹

If his tomb is not empty, the creative force of the crucified and risen Jesus is easily accommodated to ideologies of whatever kind. Easter becomes a meaningless holiday and a marketing opportunity for chocolate eggs. Unless that space is left empty, it will be filled with something else.

Christ: A Privileged Instance?

There is a further theological aspect to be considered. Jesus is “the resurrection and the life” (Jn 11:25). His followers share in his resurrection: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Rom 8:11). He died, and so do we. He has been raised; and so shall we be. But, though his tomb is empty, ours will not be. His resurrection is materially complete; ours must wait, at least for its full eschatological realisation. Why is his case special?

Even if his mortal remains were there in the tomb, theology might still think of him as newly embodied in the cosmic totality, as the exemplar of ultimate life. What is the point then of this singular material transformation of the dead body of Jesus in a way that

⁶ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 335.

⁷ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 394.

⁸ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 394.

⁹ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 394.

left his tomb empty? Is his empty tomb, then, a distraction from the real mystery of the resurrection? But here it is especially important to appreciate that we are dealing with a divine economy of action. It is designed to display the extent of God's saving love. The incarnation of the Word exists within the totality of God's transforming activity. It includes the whole of creation, matter as well as spirit. The raising of the dead-and-buried Jesus from the tomb is designed to show the glory of God in action.¹⁰ For hope, it is of cosmic significance. Jesus is transformed in the totality of what he was when laid in the tomb. The matter that made up his crucified body is transformed. It is not left to be "raw material" for his full-bodied risen existence. In fact, it is the least promising material for the glory of God to be revealed. His corpse is the remains of man who had been executed in defeat, humiliation, and apparent abandonment by the God in whose name he had claimed to act. What, then, is its significance?

Aquinas remarks that the Jesus' risen body is not an imagined reality (*corpus phantasticum*), but the God-wrought embodiment of the saving Word.¹¹ His death is not the result of the entropic forces of nature which lead to decay. It figures in the divine intention "to show forth the power of God" (*ad ostensionem virtutis divinae*).¹² The resurrection and the empty tomb are related in the actual divine economy of salvation. As the agent of the Kingdom, he has been defeated, condemned, crucified, dead and buried. He did not come down from the cross nor walk out of the tomb to rejoin his distraught followers in life as usual. He comes to them in a new order of existence. For this reason, there is certain appropriateness – or *convenientia*, as the Scholastics would say – in the transformation of his crucified body. It occurs to display, in an anticipatory manner, the power of God at work. The Holy Spirit is in no way constrained by the defeats, condemnations, violence and burials that mark the human history that is summed up in this man.

The imagination of hope is earthed in a singular realism. As it contemplates Jesus rising from the tomb, it looks on him who was pierced (John 19:37. cf. Zech 12:10). The Lamb who was slain retains the marks of the cross even in his risen body. In his total physicality he is the medium through which the true creation of the Spirit is revealed. "I was dead, but now I live forever and ever" (Rev 1:18). Our ordinary ways of speaking of the deceased naturally use personal terms in reference to the corpse – at least before burial. "He" or "she" is lying in the coffin, not an impersonal "it." But the dead body of Jesus had a further significance. This flesh, this body, was given for the life of the world. This blood was poured out for the new covenant. These overlays of significance deriving from his presence to the disciples caused his dead body to be identified as not only "it", but "his", or even "he", in a striking way. Note the announcement of the angel at the tomb, "... I know that you were looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised... Come, see the place where *he* lay" (Mt 28:5-6; Mk 16:1-6). Likewise the words of Mary Magdalene, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb; and we do not know where they have laid *him*" (John 20:2, 13, 15). There seems to be some implication that his dead body still represents him in an unusual way. It is Jesus-in-his-death. It points to a singular instance in the divine economy. If God raised him up in his total physical reality, the scope of his victory over the powers of death must include his physical

¹⁰ Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), especially 133-163.

¹¹ *STh* 3, q. 54, a. 1.

¹² *STh* 3, q. 51, a. 3.

resurrection. His tomb is an empty space in the fabric of this world. It is the material anticipation of the universal transformation that is in store.

The Word in the Tomb

Yet theological tradition contains a deeper explanation. For instance, Aquinas sees the dead body of Jesus as still in relation to the divine Word. The Word was made flesh (John 1:14), right to the point of becoming a corpse. But, in the context of the hypostatic union, it could be said that the crucified Jesus does not immediately become a corpse in the usual sense. For the divine person that he was, and is, continues to be related to this dead body. It is still the body of the Word. The corpse of the crucified Jesus must be seen in the light of the full realism of God's self-communication to the world.

Aquinas, accordingly, places this consideration in a strongly incarnational context. The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us. And the Word continues to be spoken amongst us in the dead body of Jesus. Though the soul and body of Jesus are separated in death, *this* dead body is still personally possessed by the divine Word for the divine purposes. As Thomas writes, "the body of Christ, living and dead, is the same by reason of its divine subject, because, in life and in death, it possesses no other hypostasis (personal subject) than that of the Word of God."¹³ Though the divine Word is not the soul of the body, the hypostatic union remains even in regard to the dead body in the tomb. It is the dead body of the Word of God who became flesh, in life and in death. Its fundamental significance is to be sought in the manifestation of divine freedom: "God is not constrained by necessity but acts out of freedom" (*quia Deus non ex necessitate agit, sed ex voluntate*).¹⁴

From beginning to end, it is all about the revelation of the unique realism of God's saving action. For the sake of history, God has acted in history, not by communicating a new idea, but by doing a provocatively and properly divine thing. By transforming the physical remains of Jesus, God's intention for the whole of creation is anticipated and distilled in this unique instance. The world is no longer a total system of entropy and decay. It is not, in the end, a cemetery. Though death is still our common fate, a transformation has been wrought as a blessing on all the tombs of the world.

Hence it is important to put the problem in the right place. It is not helped when theology leaves the dead body of Jesus in the tomb with the presumption that the resurrection has no physical effect in the world of matter. The problem is to understand how matter can be transformed. How is the risen body of Jesus a transformed materiality? How will it be for each of us in the end? How will the entire universe, and ourselves within it, be transformed in him? The problem with transformation is that we cannot imagine what transformation means before it happens. In this case, it would be easier to imagine how the twenty-six letters of the alphabet could become a poem than to imagine how the body of the dead Jesus becomes the reality of the Risen One. If theology glosses over the biblical evidence of the empty tomb, it cannot but look on the world as a vast graveyard, perhaps with an inkling of an afterlife of some kind. But in terms of what the Spirit actually has wrought in Christ, the world has ceased to be a graveyard. It is more a garden in which the seeds of eternal life are sprouting. New life has sprung up within it. The dead body of Jesus has been transformed.

¹³ *STh* 3, q. 50, a. 5.

¹⁴ *STh* 3, q. 50, a. 2 ad 3.

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