

Five Surprises in the Resurrection Stories¹

I'm going to talk today about five surprises that arise out of the resurrection narratives. Now, the fact that Jesus came back from the grave alive of course is the greatest surprise of all. But that's not what I want to talk about this morning. What fascinates and encourages me is the surprising way that all four gospel writers present the story. It's this presentation that actually leaves me feeling more confident than ever that what they're saying about resurrection is reliable and revolutionary.

Now, for those of you who will be attending the lecture by John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg tomorrow, what I'm saying today will likely be directly contradicted by our scholar guests. They belong to a school of biblical study that denies the resurrection, the miracles, the virgin birth, and virtually everything else including the genuineness of the leather binding on your Bible. What I want to talk about is evidence that something wonderful really happened that energized the disciples and changed the world. And these five surprises lead us in, I think, unusual ways into that truth.

The first surprise that we run into as we read the resurrection narratives is strange silence of the Bible in the resurrection stories. By the time readers of the gospel stories

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get the resurrection they are accustomed to the almost constant reminder that something in Jesus' ministry was according to the scriptures, namely what we call the Old Testament. One scholar compared the complete lack of Biblical adornment the literary equivalent to an orchestra falling silent and only the solo flute playing on. For some reason, which we'll get to, the gospel writers cease making constant reference to the Old Testament as they narrate Jesus' empty tomb and appearances.

The second strange factor about the Easter stories is that they make no mention of personal eternal life. Nowhere are the disciples on Easter Day saying, "Whoopie! Jesus lives and that means eternal life for us also!" Now, please understand. Everlasting life is clearly a ramification of Jesus rising from the dead. Paul talks about it clearly. But no mention is made of the disciples' everlasting life at the ends of the four gospels in their setting forth of the Easter stories and Jesus' 40 days with his disciples. What we do see in almost every instance is Jesus instructing the disciples to get busy with mission. Tell the world is their commission and that happens repeatedly.

The third strange factor in the resurrection stories is the way that the risen Jesus is portrayed. I remember attending the passion play in Spearfish, South Dakota, way back in the 1970's.

After four hours of drama the play reached the climactic scene—the coming of Jesus from the tomb. For this scene, the creators of the play employed every dramatic device they could muster for a live action drama. First the stage went entirely black for several seconds. Then they threw on the lights and the orchestra hit a loud triumphant chord! Ta da! There stood the Risen Christ in glory coming forth from the tomb. It was a freeze frame and intended to be very glorious and powerful.

I mention the passion play to contrast it with the gospel's portrayal of the resurrection. There is no ta da! No lights. No glory. Even the transfiguration several chapters back is more glorious. Instead, Jesus comes back, a startling presence to be sure, but in what I'd call an everyday fashion. To exaggerate, Jesus saunters in and asks, "Do you have anything to eat?" Or to doubting Thomas, Jesus says, "Go ahead, put your finger in the wound here." It's like someone in the hospital saying, "Do you want to look at my incision?" You're thinking, "that's more information than I really need." Now, Jesus does seem to appear and disappear readily, which means that he is somewhat different than he was before his crucifixion. But he's surprisingly earthy and earthly in the Easter stories.

Then we have, fourthly, the sudden emergence of the women disciples in the Easter stories. I think that they were women

exclusively who first found the empty tomb, first encountered the living Jesus, and were first responsible to report the news to others.

Now, by the standards of the biblical period, having women be the first witnesses was not what say a public relations firm would plan, if the whole thing were made up. This is because in those days when women were indeed second class citizens, their status as witnesses for court cases had not yet been established. In the same way, we don't have felons and homeless people write our letters of recommendation when we apply for a job. In our day, we don't consider such good references to vouch for us. We've come a long way on this one, but in Jesus time, women were just not considered as reliable as men—except in the resurrection stories where they are solely responsible for the most important testimony of all time.

Finally, this. The four gospel accounts of the resurrection don't agree with one another as to quite a number of details. Some details, such as the two men walking with Jesus to Emmaus, appear in only one gospel, in this case, Luke. Matthew alone reports that the Romans set a guard at the tomb. Even the number and names of the women who go to the tomb first thing Easter dawn is not consistent across the four gospels. Luke, in one instance, doesn't even agree with himself. At one

point he relates that Peter went to check out the tomb. Later in that chapter, he places on the lips of one of the Emmaus travelers, that multiple disciples went to check out the tomb. Certainly in a book as sophisticated as Luke, the author would have ironed out such inconsistency.

Now, it may sound like these strange elements subtract from the credibility of the gospel accounts. But I'd argue precisely the opposite. It is the very roughness and lack of expected slickness, that suggests that what we're getting in the gospels is the unvarnished, un-tampered with, un-edited early account of the resurrection from a tradition that is dishing up the earliest reports as honestly as possible.

If you're a science teacher and you've divided your class into teams of students working on an experiment, do you believe the team that turns in a perfectly executed experiment with identical measurements, and predictable results. Or do you believe the team that reports inconsistency, some puzzling data measurements, a frank admission of mistakes, and disagreement between the team members? Isn't there something just more honest and frankly scientific about the team whose work is just a little untidy and not pat?

This is how the Bible is. Isn't it amazing that you and I get four versions of Jesus' story—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

It isn't as if the early church didn't think of blending these all together into one authoritative story. They did that. But that book--called the Diatesseron--never made it into the Bible. What we get are four voices. The whole Bible is that way. The history of Israel is narrated both in the Samuel and Kings books and then again in Chronicles. The word of God comes to us like a choir. Not every voice is singing the same note. But all are singing the same song.

So what do you and I get out of all of this? Quite a number of our Christian forebears testify that Jesus was raised from the dead. It happened in real history, not in the minds of distraught believers. At first, the resurrection caught everyone off guard. It was completely different than anything the early followers expected. It took years for the full implications of the resurrection to sink in. And the full implications have probably not yet sunk in.

What happened at the first Easter was thoroughly believed and thoroughly revolutionized the early church. And, best of all, even at the remove of over two thousand years, those first believers, our Christian forebears, have managed to get word of Jesus' return to us in a remarkably genuine, un-canned, un-massaged, un-fudged manner. It's called the Bible. It's called the Gospels. And for you and me, living in a time that would

love to tell us that our faith is the work of dummies or the result of a conspiracy, it turns out that the surprises in the story are the best surprise of all.