

Easter III

“because I go to the Father” (Gospel)

The Prayer Book rapidly exhausts the stock of New Testament passages explicitly about the Resurrection, whether narratives (gospels) or explanations (epistles). Should we be surprised? The truth is that the Resurrection is the presupposition of every passage in the New Testament. No resurrection, and all is futile. It is only because the Resurrection was a present experience that anything was worth writing down and so has become available to us. And for that very reason, most of what is written is not directly about the Resurrection.

The early Believers are precisely that – those who believe that Jesus has died and been raised and that therefore there is hope for his followers. Take the belief out, and nothing is left. Because Jesus has been raised, therefore his previous words and deeds are worth preserving – they have been validated. If not, he would be just another of the many teachers (or in the gentile world philosophers) who have a brief following and are soon forgotten.

Resurrection, then. But to what? Not a mere resumption of ordinary life. We assume (but are not told) that this is what Lazarus experienced (or the widow's son at Nain). Back to ordinary life, but still to face ordinary death. Clearly this is not what the New Testament tells us about Jesus. “Death hath no more power over him.” The end of his earthly existence is not death, but going to the Father. The risen Jesus is not a ghost, a vision without a living body. The possibility is implied, but only to be dismissed. He can eat and drink, he can be touched. We may want to say this is extraordinary or anomalous life, but bodily life it is. But with the limit not of death, but of ascension. And ascension itself is a bodily event – so there can be no corpse to bury this time (compare the taking up of Elijah and the futile search for his body).

Matthew mentions the saints of the Old Covenant who had their own brief resurrection before their own (implied) ascension into heaven. We do not have to count days in this matter. Ascension is a transfiguration (to think of it as a movement is to trivialise it) out of created time as it is out of created place; God who created our four dimensions is not bound by them. Eastertide, then, commemorates a short and anomalous period. A period of blessing; of teaching and commissioning for the Apostles. But it could never have been expected to endure; the whole point was the going to the Father and the miracle, if you like, was the delay, which was for us, not from any need in Jesus himself. “A little while”, the Gospel says. It was at a human level inevitable that there would be a desire to cling to Jesus; yet the point of Eastertide was its end, which is Ascension.

Sorrow, and then joy. Not, I think, the crucifixion as a brief interruption in the experience of the disciples. This is for all of us. Sorrow is a normal Christian experience. There must be the “wrong kind” of both sorrow and joy, but the Way does lead “through the night of doubt and sorrow”. It can be a long night.

“Going to the Father” is a good description of what Christianity is about, for Christ is the Way. There is a risk of imagining that the Way is a moral code, perhaps with ritual practices annexed, to make this life a little more tolerable. As with all parodies, there is some truth in this, but it is the truth of a Judaism which has lost the virtue of Hope. The greater truth of the Way as the Church receives it is where it leads – to the Father. To have the Easter faith is to accept that destination, that purpose, that Hope – and therefore to lay ourselves open to the help needed for the journey. And that help is Christ who has gone before us and created the Way. “No man cometh unto the Father but by me”.

Yes, we have a life to live, and a death to die. Being “saved” does not exempt us from either. There is a Christian life, and the teaching in the Epistle should be valued, the more so as we find ourselves in a hostile world similar to that of the early Christians. This is not a mere matter of survival skills. God's purpose from the very beginning is not to dehumanise us (to rescue “souls” from a hostile environment) but to humanise us and to make us, with the rest of the created order, function as we, and it, should in relation to Him. That is why Christ was incarnate. That is why he takes his mortal body with him to heaven, to the very presence of God, and why we will, please God, rise with our bodies when the time comes for our own Ascension, our going to the Father.