

Easter 2022: 16th April 2022

Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

Our new house in Melbourne sits at the North End of the Melbourne Central cemetery. Rani and I have gone for several walks through this cemetery – it is the most direct walking route do and from the CBD. This vast area must contain tens of thousands of graves. Some of the newest have shiny black granite tomb stones. One grave has a particular 10 metre high stone angel straight out of the book of Revelation. Many graves are so old that they don't even have a headstone, and yet one of these ancient and unmarked old graves had a rather sodden teddy bear bearing witness. A walk through this place is a poignant reminder of what awaits all of us. Fifteen hundred years ago, St Benedict wrote in his rule for his monasteries (4:47), "Keep death always before your eyes". This was not to be morbid, but to value life and the decisions we make.

Walking past the cemetery again this week made me think of the Gospel reading for Easter Sunday this year. It made me wonder. If a person had just buried a family member in the Melbourne Central cemetery and came back a while later and found the tomb stone removed and the grave empty, what might be their reaction. If it were me, I think my reaction would be anger and the first thought would be, 'who stole the body'. In John's gospel this is Mary Magdalene's first reaction. She says to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple, "They took the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have put him".

But beyond this first simple and practical question, the whole story of the empty tomb becomes far more mysterious. It moves beyond a question of potential grave robbing, to a whole range of emotions which we would not simply associate with the robbing of a grave. These emotions speak to a longer period of reflection on the deep significance of the empty tomb following direct encounters with the risen Christ:

- Confusion (Luke 24:4)
- Terror (Luke 24:5)
- Disbelief about the nonsense of the story (Luke 24:11)
- Amazement (Luke 24:12)
- Blindness (Luke 24:16)
- Alarm and Terror (Luke 24:36)
- Disbelief from joy (Luke 24:41)
- Amazement (Luk4 24: 41)

It is impossible for us to know what happened in the actual resurrection of Christ because no one was there when it actually happened. All we have is stories which try to say something about the after-effects. And those after effects – the way the resurrection appearances are related, make it clear what the resurrection of Christ is NOT.

The resurrection is not a simple resuscitation of a physical body in the same way as the story of Lazarus. The raised Christ is not a body spinning in orbit somewhere out there in the physical universe. Jesus did not take off into the sky like a rocket ship in the Ascension. Jesus did not come back to life in the easy way in which we might think of such an event....in the sense of 'O hey – I thought you were dead – but here you are alive after all – great, let's go get a pizza'.

Neither is the resurrection is a happy ending to a bad story which happened on Friday.

In this sense the resurrection does not happen on a linear time frame of our physical universe. The resurrection is pointing to a radical disruption of any conception we have of space and time . The two men in the tomb, in clothing which shone like lighting, say to the women, “why do you seek the living with the dead? He is not here”.

The question we may want to ask is “well if Jesus is not here in the grave, then where is he”? (the grave-robbing question). But ‘where’ is he is a temporal question within the realm of the physical universe. It’s the wrong question to ask. The real question being posed is, ‘*what is the nature of life and death*’. Because now what we THOUGHT was death and what we THOUGHT was life (things on a time line) have been transfigured in ways which completely blow out of the water all our conceptual categories.

What happens to our understanding of death if there is not dead body to look at and weep over? There have been some terrible images coming out of Ukraine in recent weeks. The streets are littered with dead bodies. An old woman buries her son in a make shift grave – a tomb in the back yard of her own home. What appears to be the finality of death pervades our world and threatens to overwhelm us. But what happens to our understanding of death when there is no body?

Or to reverse the question, ‘what is life?’. Is ‘life’ simply oxygen flowing through the carbon atoms, and animating the DNA, of a physical human body?

The death and resurrection of Christ are pointing to a reconfiguring of the true meaning of death and life, which is also an insight into the deepest foundation of the universe (Logos = Love). In the resurrection, God shows that God brings an utterly new creation OUT of what appears to us to be chaos (Genesis 1:1) and this can only happen because God has immersed God’s self into the chaos of our creation – the price of our freedom (incarnation and cross). And despite the chaos of our creation, the resurrection is the definitive final word (Colossians 3:11). We discover that, in the end, the life of God is the only ultimate and enduring reality. The true significance of our lives – our deepest ‘being’ is embedded in the life of God rather than in our physical DNA. This does not make our physicality unimportant. Our bodies are gifts of God by which we gift the world and give honour to God. We affirm and value the body. ¹But our deepest identity does not *rely* on the survival of our bodies. If it did, then those who suffer profound physical and mental disabilities – those who are apparently ‘useless’ to the world, would be considered less than human, and such a thought is anathema to Christians. St Paul will later say, “your life (your true being) is hidden with Christ in God”.

The tomb of the chrysalis is now an empty cave. The butterfly has flown – a transfigured body which is continuous with a caterpillar but now transformed in some way that is beyond our comprehension (1 Corinthians 15:35-58) the mystery which underlies the mysterious nature of all the resurrection accounts.

In the resurrection, Jesus appears to us as a radically different future – one that we could not have imagined. The raised Christ is not just a new kind of historical time line in heaven which is continuous with a timeline on earth. Jesus’s resurrection is a glimpse into a new heaven and a new

¹ In contrast to the ‘Gnostics’ who saw the world and the body as corrupt, and from which our spiritual ‘soul’ needed to be released to find its true home on some purer spiritual realm.

earth – a new creation. What happened to Jesus in full, we glimpse only in part. In this new creation, everything that has ever been and ever will be is held in the deathless consciousness of God. Those we have loved (their true identity) who have died are not rotting the grave or burned up into the exhaust of a crematory. Their true identity is held in the memory of God and their bodies will, in the termination of the universe, also be transfigured along with the carbon of planets and stars. This is all our destinies.

When I walk through the Melbourne cemetery it can feel sad to see these old forgotten graves with no tomb stones. I think of the people there most of whom within two or three generations will be forgotten to history. A tomb stone is an attempt to extend that memory just a little longer. But trying to do so is but a drop in the magnitude of time. While we might think all those graves contain the dead, but in fact those tombs are empty. The dead have been raised. They are remembered in the eternity of God. We need not look for the living amount the dead. Christ is risen. Alleluia.