

### *The Humanity of the Risen Jesus*

However "other", disconcerting, surprising and irruptive his self-disclosure, Jesus still appears as a human being.<sup>12</sup> His humanity has not been volatilised by some other-worldly contact with the divine. He is not a ghost haunting the world that had rejected him; nor is he a spectre formed by the projections of a guilty conscience as is the case with Herod in regard to the Baptist (Mk 6:14-16). He is risen as the one who had been crucified under Pontius Pilate, but as now transformed, and embodying a new beginning for the death-dealing world that had gotten rid of him.

The evangelists stress that disciples eventually identified the risen One as the Jesus of Nazareth whom they had known—even to the extent of being able to recognise the wounds by which he died. While his otherness is not collapsed into the familiar, Jesus comes as one whom the disciples had previously known. He bears the stigmata of his death and evokes the memory of his past meals with them (Lk 24:39-41).<sup>13</sup> He is simultaneously dead to this world and alive in a new order of existence. It is not as though he is resuscitated to this life. His lethal wounds have not been divinely healed. What is communicated in his rising from the tomb is that the death that the world dealt him is not the defining factor, but God's glorification of this victim to self-giving love. He is the Lamb who was slain (Rev 5:6), the incarnation of the sacrificial self-giving that alone can undo the destructive power of evil and challenge the forces that work through the threat of death. His resurrection is, therefore, not simply the reversal of death, but, on a completely other level, the manifestation of life beyond death and its power. The reason for the continuance of the stigmata is suggested by Thomas Aquinas as he cites the venerable Bede, "He keeps the wounds, not because they cannot be healed, but that he may carry around the triumph of his victory forever".<sup>14</sup> The resurrection of the crucified One is the showing forth of divine glory and victory.<sup>15</sup> In the full-bodied reality of the crucified and risen One, the dark symbols of a death-dealing world are trans-valued. Mortality is not only transcended, but also death is radically transformed. It loses its immemorial sting. Jesus is risen, not only through an agency beyond this world of death, but also as revealing himself as a reality within it. In this regard, hope is not based on nice ideas, but on a living and life-giving fact: the risen Christ himself. In him, the deathward gravity of our experience is reversed: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (Jn 1:5).

The economy of the unique series of resurrection appearances will be finished when, ascended into heaven, Jesus is removed from any categorical levels of human relationships—either as the beloved master who had called his disciples (in the case of the Twelve), or as the one whose followers were persecuted (in the case of Paul). From then on, he will

relate to followers in a manner unknown to the mundane world of experience—that is, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. He "ascends" from the death-limited world of human relationships. But the Spirit "descends" to fill that empty space to make of it a field of new forms of relationship to him and to the Father.

### *Forgiveness*

A further aspect of the gratuitous appearances of the risen Christ to his disciples is forgiveness. He does not return as a judge to expose the betrayal and obtuseness of the disciples. He is not a judge fabricated by their "idolic" projections of guilt, but rather the icon back-lit by limitless mercy and forgiveness. The disciples' guilt and failure were not therefore the determining factor in their relationships to him and to the God he reveals. Rather, he comes as the embodiment of a gift and a love without condition. There is a judgment involved, but it is the judgment of grace on the human condition—of a love unconditioned by any human sin or weakness, opening into a new kind of relationship to Christ and the Father, as is dramatically portrayed in the case of Peter (Jn 21:15-19). Faced with the risen Lord, the early witnesses are not addressed either as subject to a judgment demanding punishment, nor as sinners called to repentance. Whatever their past failures, the risen Jesus finds them in a love and forgiveness that cause them to witness to others of what they themselves have received. Significantly, in John's Gospel, Jesus greets his disciples with the blessing of peace, and sends them as the Father has sent him (Jn 20:19-23). He then breathes the Holy Spirit on them, and commissions them as agents of reconciliation. They can forgive—and "retain", that is, confront and unmask the evil in the still-conflicted world to which they have been sent.<sup>16</sup> Paul can tell the Corinthians, that if Christ is not risen, they are still in their sins (1 Cor 15:17). But since he has been raised, the all-determining factor of their identity, both now and in the future, is the love that has overcome the power of evil in all its forms. The "perfect love" that has appeared casts out all fear (1 John 4:18).

### *The Empty Tomb*

The biblical data regarding the resurrection of Jesus and his appearances to various witnesses include 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 of the empty tomb remains a complex question. On the one hand, it never suggests, either for the disciples or for those who would profit from their testi-

mony, 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, let alone of the beginning of a new creation.

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" addressed the—at first perplexed, and then terrified—women with this question. The declaration follows: "He is not here, but has risen" (Lk 24:5b). These factors 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. But it would be the silence of mute wonder and joy in response to an event for which the world had no words. But before that, the women's first report to the apostles of what they had seen and heard had seemed "as an idle tale" (Lk 24:11), even 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 of what had taken place, it was not about the mere emptiness of the tomb. It was in the words of joyful witness to "these things" in which the power and mercy of God are manifest (Lk 24:45-49). The resurrection does not mean, therefore, that Jesus returns to his disciples as a striking figure within the conditions of the world in which he had been crucified. He is no triumphant religious celebrity imposing himself on gullible disciples and telling a tale of escaping death in a world in which death still reigned. His resurrection is no narrow escape from his adversaries or from mortality itself. The world of previous relationships has died with him. But what happened to him opens his existence to another realm of relationships, unbounded by death, transforming human freedom to levels of joy, hope and courage that nothing apart from his resurrection can explain. Though an all-deciding event, it still demanded 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).

Such is the context in which 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. The empty tomb, therefore, 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 ilk.

If theology dismisses or bypasses the significance of the empty tomb, there are inevitable negative consequences. The phenomenon 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.<sup>17</sup> After all, unless it were 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.<sup>18</sup> For that matter, neither friend nor foe pretended 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 (Mt 28:1-15). This was a quite predictable reaction on the part of those for whom, for whatever reason, Jesus had to stay dead and buried.

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, it recalls Christian faith to be defiantly full-bodied in its realism. The emptiness of the tomb shows the power of the Spirit as 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 not an idol of human projection and defensive apologetics. On the other hand, it does leave its trace in time and space and matter, thereby suggesting that there are far more surprises in store than scientifically predictable events can allow. It sows a seed of wonder and questioning in the ground of the material cosmos. A whole worldview is called into question. N. T. Wright underscores the political and cultural consequences:

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.<sup>19</sup>

David Bentley Hart makes a similar observation. 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, to an amazed inability to say what they have seen and heard.<sup>20</sup>

What is at stake is a whole worldview. 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 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. With that solid assurance, all the boundaries 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 remain secure: "The tomb, after all, is the symbol *par excellence* of metaphysical totality and of the mythos of cosmic violence."<sup>21</sup>

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 the fullness of life that a death-bound world could not allow. The world is not an enclosed totality. The empty tomb points beyond every limit, whether accepted or imposed. There is no definitive salvation in any system of thought or conduct which leaves the forces of oppression basically unchallenged.<sup>22</sup>

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 desperate efforts to reduce the "real world" to the idolic certitudes of violence, pride and greed. "He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly" (Lk. 1:32). For this event, given within history in the emptiness of the tomb, the transformations it effects, causes a deep turbulence in the

lished 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 forevermore' (Rev 1:18)."<sup>23</sup> In contrast, 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 thinking"). A kind of all-pervading sadness is never far from the coercive power of violence. It is a dismal concession to the loss of all ultimate hope. Yet both the defeats of melancholy and the pretensions of violence stand under the divine judgment of life to the full.<sup>24</sup>

The raising of the crucified Jesus from this tomb remains a scandal to all the despairing attitudes and desperate systems that would reject the power of God to transform the world. The emptiness of the tomb now "marks a boundary beyond which God has passed in Christ without allowing the beauty of his gift to be consumed by the indeterminate."<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup>

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 sepulchral space is left empty, the resurrection of Christ is either lost in a mystical vagueness or replaced by a self-referential theological form of rationalism. However stupefying this emptiness is, it must be critically guarded. Nature abhors a vacuum; and the monuments to power and triumph begin to tilt dangerously when there is an empty space at their foundations. But in this indicator of a new creation, those united to the risen Christ 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 shall 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 still in the tomb, theology could still think of him as newly embodied in a new form of existence, beyond the mortal limits of earthly life. What is the point (instead of holding to this superior material transformation of the dead body of Jesus so that his tomb is empty)? Indeed, by assuming the empty tomb, theology might not think he died at all. The empty tomb and the empty tomb, might not think he died at all. The empty tomb and the empty tomb of a promised resurrection.

all aspects of Christian revelation, we must first of all be open to the phenomenality of the *economia*, the pattern of God's freely given salvation. Philosophy might be bewildered and religious projections scandalised, but the question is, has God acted or not? And if it is allowed that God could act, why did God act in this manner?

Theology must "seek understanding", but first of all it must be receptive to what is given to be understood. Here it is brought back to the concrete manner in which the Father has chosen to display the extent of his saving love in and for the whole of creation. The Word became not theory, not myth, but flesh—with all the contingencies and particularities that this implies. The raising of the dead-and-buried flesh of Jesus from the tomb is designed to serve the manner in which a love untrammelled by earthly conditions has acted.<sup>27</sup> Something of cosmic significance is being revealed when 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. His tortured corpse has been changed into his full-bodied risen existence. It cannot but have appeared as the least promising material for the glory of God to be revealed. His corpse is the remains of a 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 Jesus' risen body is not an imagined reality (*corpus phantasticum*), but the God-wrought embodiment of the saving Word.<sup>28</sup> His death is not the result of the entropic forces of nature which lead to decay. It figures in the way God has acted "to show forth the divine power" (*ad ostensionem virtutis divinae*).<sup>29</sup> In this showing-forth, the resurrection and the empty tomb belong together in the concrete particularity of the divine economy or pattern of action. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God led him to defeat, condemnation and execution. He was left dead and buried. His vindication by the God he has so intimately invoked as "Father" did not mean that he came down from the cross, nor that he walked out of the tomb to rejoin his distraught followers in life as usual. He came to them in a new realm of existence. For that reason, there is a 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 Spirit of God at work. God's power is in no way constrained by the defeats, condemnations, violence and burials that mark the human history embodied in this man. Jesus rose to face his disciples who had looked on him transfixed on the cross (Jn 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 given to faith in a form that anticipated a new creation: "I was dead, but now I live forever and ever" (Rev 1:18). He had been done to death as the representative and agent of God's reign.

His blood had been poured out for the new covenant. He has previously been present to the disciples who had had every reason to fear that death—for him and even for themselves—would result from his head-on confrontation with the violent powers of politics and religion with only God to defend him. Their fears were justified, as they mourned the execution that eventually occurred. His dead body was the gruesome expression of his failed mission, his prayer unanswered and his Father's defeat. For God to raise him from the tomb of disgrace and defeat would manifest the scope of a divine victory over the powers of death and violence that had, so they thought, terminally rid themselves of him. His tomb would become a provocatively empty space in the fabric of the world that had done away with him.

There is, then, a unique realism in this economy of salvation. God has acted in history, not by communicating a new idea, but by doing a provocatively and properly divine thing. Through Jesus' transformed physicality, the divine intention for the whole of creation is anticipated and manifested in this exemplary instance. As a result, the world is no longer a total system of entropy and decay, nor a theatre in which the scripts of self-justifying violence are enacted. Even though death is still our common fate, its dominion has been disturbed. The risen Christ is the first and last letter, the "alpha and the omega" (Rev 22:12), of an alphabet by which the great poem of the Word comes to expression. A love stronger than death has been revealed.

#### Overture to World History

The appearances of the risen Jesus, with their association with the empty tomb, are a history-forming phenomenon. As with all significant events, there is an inherent "structural delay": as the lethal limits of the pre-resurrectional world are thrown into disarray, a new realm of divine possibilities opens up. Jesus turns the gaze of the apostles away from the familiar regions of Jerusalem and Galilee, out to "the ends of the earth" (Acts 3:8). He discloses himself as moving forward to the Galilee of the Gentiles, not as gathering his disciples around him in the Holy City (Mk 16:7). His disciples are sent to witness "to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk 24:37; cf. Mt 28:18-20). The risen Jesus thus discloses himself as the leading edge of the direction in which the Church must move, forward and outward. The resurrection of Jesus cannot be separated from his mission to the world in which his followers are to share (Jn 20:21). Though Jesus had appeared to them, his communication looked beyond the especially privileged few to the wider world of faith. Though they had "seen the Lord", blessed are those others who, without seeing, will simply believe (Jn 20:29; 1 Pet 1:8). His self-disclosure to chosen witnesses does not, therefore, enclose them