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Easter 2009: What does any of this mean?

Richard McBrien | Apr. 6, 2009 Essays in Theology

Easter is at the heart and center of the Christian faith, and yet every year it seems more and more difficult to say or write anything about it that doesn?t strike many listeners or readers as repetitive or riddled with clichés.

If we were to pay attention to what Pope Benedict XVI says about Easter in his blessing this Sunday to the city (of Rome) and to the world, his words would have a completely familiar ring to them, as will the words uttered by the homilist at Mass.

This is not said in criticism of the pope or of anyone who is charged with offering a reflection on the religious significance of Easter.

I had a professor in the seminary many years ago who made a point that has stayed with me ever since, namely, that the liturgical year resembles a spiral rather than a circle. Every year we celebrate the same important feasts, but we are not in the same spiritual place that we were in the previous year.

For good or for ill, we change from year to year, and so does the impact of the feast upon our consciousness and our spiritual development.

We are simply not the same person, for example, who may have read this column?s Easter reflections three years ago: about the Resurrection?s being essential to our salvation (1 Corin-thians 15:17), about our abiding hope that we will somehow share in Christ?s Resurrection (Romans 6:3-11; 2 Corinthians 4:14; 11:25-26), or about the Resurrection?s making it possible for us to receive the Holy Spirit (John 7:39; 16:7).

To be sure, I wrote a year later, ?belief in the Resurrection is just that -- an expression of faith. It is not grounded on scientific evidence, which is not to say that the belief is without any basis whatever.

?In fact,? the column continued, ?there was a remarkable and wholly inexplicable change in the disciples (some 500 in all) who claimed to have ?seen? the risen Lord. Many willingly accepted martyrdom rather than deny him or his resurrection from the dead.?

?In the end, however, the Resurrection is not about [newly discovered] bones but about the transformation of one?s life. Faith in the Resurrection requires us to live as Jesus did, dying to self for the sake of others, in the hope of rising again.?

Last year, too, this column raised the problem of familiarity. What we say and write about Easter always runs the risk of becoming a kind of religious boilerplate.

That particular column focused on Jesus? coming alongside two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, a village just seven miles from Jerusalem. The disciples were downcast because they had invested such high hopes in the one who had been crucified.

When Jesus asked them what they had been discussing, they responded with some measure of disbelief: ?Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days??

?What sort of things?? Jesus asked.

The two disciples proceeded to tell him about how the chief priests had handed over Jesus the Nazarene to be crucified. They also relayed the reports of some women in their group who had gone to the tomb the next morning and found it empty, and who insisted that they were informed by angels that Jesus was alive.

Jesus could contain himself no longer. He scolded his two disciples for their slowness to believe what the prophets had foretold, namely, that it would be necessary for the Messiah to suffer before entering into his glory. He then interpreted for them Moses and the other prophets.

As the three of them approached Emmaus, the visitor indicated that he intended to go on alone. Since it was almost evening, the other two invited him to join them for supper.

It was when Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them that ?their eyes were opened and they recognized him? (Luke 24:30-31). At which point, the Scripture says, he immediately vanished from their sight.

The two disciples hurriedly returned to Jerusalem to share their experience with the Apostles and to tell them how the risen Lord had been ?made known to them in the breaking of the bread? (vv. 33,35).

The Scripture says that Jesus then appeared in their midst, and, after eating some baked fish, led them to Bethany, where he was ?taken up to heaven? (v. 51).

The question remains: What does any of this mean for us today? Does the Resurrection make any real difference in our lives, or are we left only with Easter boilerplate?

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