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'Startled and terrified' by Easter

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

It is difficult, year after year, to write something original about the feast that is the most important in the Church's liturgical year. But even popes have the same challenge.

Every Easter the Bishop of Rome is expected to deliver a spiritual message about the meaning of the Lord's Resurrection before wishing people throughout the world a "Happy Easter" in many of their native languages.

Belief in the Resurrection, as I have written in so many Easter columns in years past, is at the heart and center of Christian faith. St. Paul declared that "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17).

But at Easter, homilies, pastoral letters, columns like this, and, yes, even papal addresses "Urbi et Orbi" (Latin, "To the City and to the World") reaffirm that historic faith -- so much so, and in such familiar, almost redundant, terms, that they unwittingly run the risk of reducing faith in the Resurrection to a kind of religious boilerplate.

What does it mean, after all, to say that Jesus, who was crucified on Good Friday, rose from his tomb on Sunday morning? Did the Resurrection really happen? Does it make any difference to us, removed from the actual event by almost twenty centuries, whether it really happened or not?

The New Testament indicates that something did happen. Jesus' tomb was found empty on that first Easter morning, and as many as 500 subsequently claimed to have seen the risen Lord. Many of these were dramatically transformed by the experience.

The earliest Christians were convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead, in spite of the fact that not even

his closest disciples had expected it to happen. That was evident from what transpired later that same day.

Two of the disciples were on their way to the village of Emmaus, seven miles from the city of Jerusalem, conversing "about all the things that had occurred" (Luke 24:14). The risen Lord came alongside and began to walk with them. Luke writes that "their eyes were prevented from recognizing him" (v. 16).

He asked the two disciples what they had been discussing. They were dumbfounded. "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 them.

The two disciples, one of whom was named Cleopas, told him how the chief priests and rulers had handed over Jesus the Nazarene, "a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people," to be crucified (vv. 19-20).

The two disciples acknowledged with regret their hopes that this Jesus "would be the one to redeem Israel." They were also disturbed, however, by reports that some of the women in their group who had gone to the tomb early that morning had found it empty.

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These same women reported seeing a "vision of angels" who announced that Jesus was actually alive. Some of the other disciples had rushed to the tomb and "found things just as the women had described" (v. 24).

At which point the risen Lord chastised the two disciples for their slowness to believe what the prophets had spoken. "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Then he proceeded to interpret for them Moses and the other prophets.

As the three approached Emmaus, the risen Lord gave the impression that he intended to go on by himself. Since it was almost evening, the two disciples urged him to stay and to share some food with them.

Luke reports that, as they were about to eat, "he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (vv. 30-31). But then he immediately vanished from their sight.

As the two disciples reflected on their fleeting experience of the risen Lord, they acknowledged that their "hearts [were] burning" as he opened the Scriptures for them.

They returned to Jerusalem at once to tell the Apostles what had taken place on the road to Emmaus and "how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (vv. 33, 35).

While they were still recounting the events of the early evening, the risen Lord stood in their midst, greeting them with the salutation, "Peace be with you" (v. 36).

Luke describes the Apostles and the other disciples as "startled and terrified," as if "they were seeing a ghost" (v. 37), so unprepared were they for the reality of the Resurrection.

Are we prepared this Easter? Or are we awash in Easter boilerplate?

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