

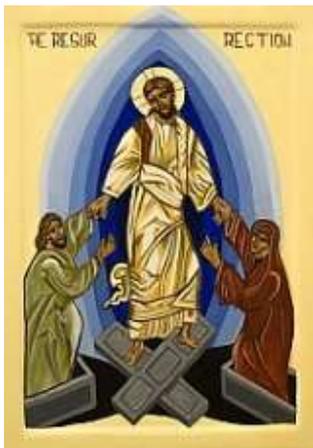
Easter 2
12/4/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 4:32-5:11
Psalm 133
1 John 1:1-2:2
John 20:19-31

The Resurrection Appearance in John 20: 19-31

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood



The Anastasis or Resurrection icon depicts Christ clothed in white, surrounded by a radiating blue capsule or mandorla (Italian for almond). To this point the icon resembles traditional icons of the Transfiguration. In the Resurrection icon Christ straddles the black abyss of death standing on two sarcophagus lids. He is drawing Adam and Eve out of their tombs. With Christ, Adam and Eve are alive, they are resurrected.

Orthodox theology is very clear that this icon does not represent any historical moment. It does not depict that which no one saw happen, which no gospel writer describes. They all describe the death and the post resurrection appearances of Jesus. Luke describes the ascension. They tell of the empty tomb but not of the emptying moment.

Neither does the Resurrection icon depict any moment in history.

Leonid Ouspensky has written of the theology of icons. He writes of the Anastasis icon, “The unfathomable character of this event for the human mind, and the consequent impossibility of depicting it, is the reason for the absence, in traditional Orthodox iconography, of the actual moment of the Resurrection.”

Orthodox theologians describe this as a dogma icon. It is not about an event. Rather it is about a truth that interprets an event. Jesus Christ was crucified and on the third day rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples. In baptism Christians enter into Christ’s death and rise into his resurrected life. “The Resurrection of Christ is simultaneously also the Resurrection of humanity; the Resurrection is not only the Resurrection of Christ, but a majestic universal event, a ‘cosmic event’”. (Branos. *Θεωρία Αγιογραφίας*. pp.216,217., http://orthodoxwiki.org/Resurrection#cite_ref-12, April 2015)

Just as Orthodox iconographers set out to paint the image of truth about Christ, so the gospel writer, John, set out to tell in story form, truth about the resurrected Christ. We can set aside the historical veracity of the story he tells. It differs remarkably from other accounts.

We have been conditioned by Luke’s gospel to understand the transition of Christ from a man inhabiting our human existence through death, burial, resurrection, post resurrection appearances to the disciples, the ascension to heaven, and then the sending of the Holy Spirit. All very lineal. Suits our time bound existence.

Rudolf Bultmann suggests that the resurrected Christ in John’s gospel who appears to the disciples behind closed doors does so as the crucified, risen and ascended One. John has told the little story of Mary in the garden mistaking the risen Jesus for the gardener. 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my

brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father... "' (John 20:17). The crucified, risen and ascended Christ appears to the disciples, greets them with peace, breathes the Holy Spirit upon them, and sends them. Christ's sending of the disciples is the same type of sending by which the Father sent the Son. The mission of God's sending of Jesus is the mission of Jesus sending the disciples. The Church is the heir of Christ's mission in the world.

Well, the gospel writers admit that this kind of stuff is a bit difficult to swallow. How are we supposed to believe such things? It is not difficult to imagine that there were members of the early Church that struggled with faith and doubt. The gospels suggest that it was ever thus from the beginning of the Church – from the beginning some took more time than others for the truth to click. Luke tells of two disciples who couldn't get it at first even though they were in the presence of the risen Lord as they walked to Emmaus. Mark tells of those who are first told of Christ's resurrection running away in fear and didn't tell anyone. The gospels are up front. Paul nailed the issue when he wrote to the Corinthians, 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,...' (1 Corinthians 1:22-23)

John puts the disbelieving problem on the shoulders of Thomas. He is the one who, for so many of us down the ages, has responded to the doctrine of the resurrection, "Prove it! – show me the evidence that the Jesus who was killed by crucifixion is the living and ascended Lord."

A week later, John tells his church, Jesus appeared again and Thomas was there and the crucified, risen and ascended Christ invited a close inspection – a come and touch the evidence invitation. Thomas makes his declaration of faith, "My Lord and my God." John doesn't say if Thomas accepted the invitation to touch. Western artists such as Caravaggio depict him making an inspection with autopsy-like thoroughness.

Stylistically the inclusion of this bit of the story is a bit clunky. But it was important to tell the story because there was a body of opinion that suggested that either Jesus was not truly incarnate – he was a heavenly being who seemed to be human, or, he did not really die but seemed to die and was resuscitated. Dan Brown favours the second theory, hence the *Da Vinci Code*. He managed to keep the heresy alive in his block buster.

Some years ago I was at a cross cultural event in which church leaders from different ethnic origins shared something of their cultural and spiritual backgrounds. The Chinese presentation was impressive. Our colleague showed us video of the parts of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games and he helped us to understand the richness of the history of Chinese spirituality told to the world in that display.

What we were hearing was so beautiful, so aligned with our Christian hopes for peace and harmony. One Anglo minister dared to ask the speaker, "So, why do you need to be a Christian?" His answer was quick and simple – "Because the Word became flesh", he said. A murmur of ascent ran through the room – an 'Amen' to this profound expression of Christian faith.

John tells the story of Thomas and his struggle to believe because from the beginning John has said, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) And John asserts at the end of his gospel account that God's word is with us in Jesus, that God is still with us in the crucified, risen and ascended Christ who breathed on his disciples and bestowed the Holy Spirit so that, in the Church, the Word still abides in flesh.

All the action is God's. The disciples are given the encounter with the risen Christ. Thomas is given what he needs to cast doubt aside. Faith is never a work of human endeavour. Faith is God's gift. New life in the crucified, risen and ascended Christ is a gift.

In like manner, those who paint an icon of the Anistasis, the Resurrection must take care that Christ's hands clasp Adam and Eve in such a way that it is clear they are not holding onto him – he is holding onto them.

Adam and Eve in the Anistasis represent all humanity, all of us. The dogma captured in this image speaks of Christ reaching to us to draw us into his new life. This is not our doing. Like it or not Christ reaches out and holds us. His new life is his gift. Ours is the choice – to live his new life – or not.
