

Colossians 3:1-45
Matthew 28:1-10

On looking in the wrong place

In a sentence:

We do not know where we are or what we are until God turns our understanding upside down.

Resurrection and magic

The delight in watching a performing magician is seeing something which doesn't 'compute': the white rabbit pulled out of the empty hat or the pretty assistant who, apparently having been sawn in two, can still wriggle her toes.

The conjurer knows the art of surprise by distraction. Crucial for her act is that we are tricked into focussing on something other than the crucial move. This is particularly the case with sleight of hand, by which the magician draws our attention to one hand while the other does the real work. If we have only our eyes to trust, we have to testify that the card 'magically' appeared where it could not have been, or the coin we have just seen has disappeared. Of course, we don't think this is 'real' magic, so we immediately wonder, 'How did she do that?'

Most of us experience the Resurrection stories of the Gospels like this. We 'see' the Resurrection by hearing the stories: this is the rabbit out of the hat. And as with the magician's trick, so with a purported resurrection, we might wonder, '*How did he do that?*' Is it *possible* that the dead can be raised?

Asking 'How?' at least allows that something special might have happened after Jesus died. But, as far as most of us are concerned, we don't think too seriously about this: there is really no trick to see here. It's perhaps a nice story, but it's 'only' a story, somewhere between straight deception or a sincere account from deluded witnesses.

Miracles and distraction

The story of Jesus' resurrection of Jesus, like the other miracle stories in the Bible, looks to us to be just a magic trick, which is to say that it seems to be nothing at all. We know there is no 'real' magic, no control of the world by *will*. Magic is only skilful manipulation, visible or hidden.

But the miracle stories are not intended to be accepted as magic. A few weeks ago, we considered an account in John's Gospel of the bringing of sight to a man born blind. We saw that a problem with 'nature miracles' is how *distracting* they are. As that account unfolds, it becomes clear that the story is not about the good luck of one person who happened to have his eyes magically opened. It is about that man coming to see who Jesus was and, at the same time, the failure of others to see the same thing, despite the overwhelming evidence. The miracle story reveals not that there is a God who does magic but the possibilities of the human heart: from the seedling faith of the healed man to the barren ground of those who opposed Jesus despite the evidence.

To see only the miracle is not to see very much at all. This applies even to resurrections, which brings us back to our reflection on Good Friday. There we considered the significance of Easter for Good Friday. Good Friday needs Easter to tell us who Jesus is, making possible language like 'messiah', 'son of God', and 'lord of glory' for the

one who dies on the cross. Good Friday matters because this one, revealed by Easter to be Lord and Messiah, dies. This is not any old crucifixion.

Not any old resurrection

But now we might turn things around to consider the importance of Good Friday for Easter. Easter needs the crucified man Jesus for us to see the sleight of hand under the distracting miracle.

In saying, 'Jesus is risen,' we naturally let the emphasis fall on the 'risen', for this is surely where the magic is: dead people don't usually stop being dead.

But Easter is not any old resurrection; it is not the resurrection of 'someone' in general. In affirming 'Jesus is risen,' the emphasis falls most of all on the '*Jesus*': not 'Jesus is risen' but '*Jesus* is risen'. This is because the real surprise is *who* is raised: as a *despised, rejected and crucified* man, Jesus is the *last* person we should expect God to raise.

To get the emphasis wrong is to mishear the gospel's declaration. At the first hearing – and for many us, at second, fifth and twentieth hearings – the Easter story sounds like Jesus dies as a man but rises as a god. But taking Easter and Good Friday together reveals the gospel's sleight of hand: the God dies, and the man rises. Easter Day reveals that it was God hanging on that cross, while Good Friday reminds us that it is a despised and rejected human being who is raised from the dead.

There are a lot of footnotes which scream to be inserted at this point, but there's more devil than God in the details.

The central 'takeaway' is that Easter is not concerned with the question of life after death, and so not with the 'idea' of our continuation after our hearts stop beating. Easter is concerned with the switch: a god is crucified, and a broken person is raised. This movement is a radical shaking up of expectations, revealing that most thinking about the Cross and Resurrection is like watching the wrong hand and being deceived.

The magic hand in which we are held

God does not seek to deceive us here, of course. It is a self-deception because we hear the story according to our own sense of what matters and is possible, and not God's.

On Friday we reflected on why, of all the endings of all the lives lived in all of history, we might concern ourselves primarily with the end of Jesus' life. We might ask the same question now of the resurrection: of all the risings which might perhaps happen, why does this one matter? These are, in fact, the same question: what has the life and death and life of *Jesus* got to do with any of *us*?

The answer is given in our short text this morning from Colossians (3.1-4). There Paul speaks of us as having our being not *in ourselves*, but of our being *in Christ*: your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ is revealed, so too are you.

This is true magic: our lives filled out, made whole, justified *in the life of another*.

Up to this point it is as if, in living our lives, we have performed a magic trick on ourselves, misleading even ourselves to look at the wrong hand. And we open that hand and see all the things we have done and all the things which have been done to us, and we think that what we hold there is all we are.

Dying as gods to live as creatures

But there is another hand which holds the secret of the trick we are. Scarred but strong, this hand holds us as we hold all we have been and desire to be. We are hidden in this strong hand, completed and made whole there, enclosed within Christ.

For this to become our reality, the *gods* we desire to be have to die so that we might emerge again from our tombs as *human beings*, re-imaged – re-imag-ined – in the humanity of Jesus. God dies on Good Friday so that a true humanity might rise at Easter. This humanity is created not to be divine but to be creaturely, not for fear but for love, not for selfishness but for service, not for self-justification but for grace and gift.

By sleight of hand God catches us, like a falling coin, to reveal in the end that we were looking in the wrong place.

‘He is not here!’ laughs the smiling magician, ‘and you should not be either. You are looking in the wrong place. He is risen and gone head. Run, and catch up to him. And all that is his will be yours’
