

The Inclusive Community

April 11, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Easter Vigil

Luke 24:1-12

We cannot prove that the Resurrection happened. The disciples could not either. This is why it was an act of faith.

We can, however, show what effect their faith in it had in them. It transformed them, as thoroughly as it transformed Jesus into Christ.

We do know that the New Testament accounts of Easter made proving it happened about as difficult as possible.

First: no one sees the event; only its consequences

Second: no one believes in it without first having serious doubts.

Third: when they do believe they cite as justification for the belief an empty tomb (which could have happened because someone took the body)

Fourth: they speak of apparitions which, they admit, did not always seem to have looked like the Jesus they knew

Fifth: they report things Jesus said before his death which did not then convince them resurrection would happen

Sixth: because the sayings were vague, not a single disciple, and they all heard him and often, expected resurrection to occur: no one was waiting at the tomb for the event.

Seventh: all the Gospels say that women were the first to report the event; this was considered, by the prejudiced consensus of their time, the least trustworthy testimony, the witness of women.

Eighth: the Easter event is proclaimed by a group of marginalized disciples whose Master was executed shamefully as a criminal and who have nothing to support their claim except an empty tomb and the fact that they saw Christ even though no non-believer can.

Ninth: indeed, this Risen Christ asks the disciples to do things the historical Jesus never did, such as, preaching to the whole world and baptizing everyone

Tenth: the Risen Christ says that not seeking proof of Easter, a faith without seeing, is better faith, more noble, than faith which seeks evidence.

Not a good deal to build a church on, not a great deal to offer in proof of the fact that the life of Jesus was valid. Paul, the earliest Christian writer, says that without the Resurrection, preaching about Jesus is in vain.

This is a daring, bold approach. Everything depends on something all the disciples at first refused to accept. Miracles were easier; lots of people accepted them immediately. Preaching was easier; lots of people accepted the truth in what Jesus said. Even execution was easier; the argument Jesus was innocent was very credible.

But this? Why this?

Would it not have been enough to say that Jesus was God's messenger, that Jesus showed us how to live and die, that Jesus returned to God after some evil people killed him, that God loves us as God loved Jesus no matter what happens to us. It was possible to build the miracles, the parables, even the cross around the fact that Jesus was God's messenger and that Jesus did not fail. One could build a religion around this; the founder of other religions in the world died and the religions flourished (Moses died; Muhammed died; Buddha died). Judaism, Islam, Buddhism did need a resurrected founder to make their case.

Let us conclude with two observations.

First: the Easter event happened.

The disciples ultimately did not need the event to make their case. Nothing in their Jewish heritage made it necessary or important to make their case this way. Something happened, so overwhelming that it led them to stake the whole message of Jesus on the most difficult evidence to prove. Miracles, parables, innocent life story were all made dependent on something no one else saw or heard except a small group of people who were close disciples.

Why would they risk so much on so little, so to speak.

Is it not just possible that unless something extraordinary happened, something they were convinced was undeniable for them, they would not have made an empty tomb, an unseen presence, a fleeting apparition into an Easter story?

Second: the effect this event had on them was far more powerful than the miracles, the preaching, the life story of Jesus.

The disciples had these three elements (they saw the miracles; heard the preaching; shared the life of Jesus) and they deserted him. They were terrified, not strong or courageous. With all this, they were still obtuse. They agreed among themselves about who should get the best job, the most power, the most desirable perks in the empire Jesus would leave them. They themselves observe that Jesus often told them they did not have much faith but he loved them nonetheless. At times, in desperation, Jesus says “enough” because of their literalism and wonders if there will be any faith left on earth after he leaves everything to them. The most difficult act of faith Jesus may have had to make was in their ability to handle the message he gave them.

The effect of the preaching of Easter was a miracle, first of all, because of what it did for the disciples. They now believed so ardently that there is no record of their doubt after Easter. They now saw clearly, by their own admission, into the meaning of what Jesus was trying to teach them. They now have no fear of suffering or death. They have enough energy and commitment to go to the ends of the world they knew. They want no power but they say over and over again that they are nothing and that the Risen Christ is everything. They insist that the miracles they do, the preaching they proclaim, are not their work but that of the Risen Christ. When Paul writes he makes no reference to the miracles, the parables or the life of Jesus. He writes only about the Risen Christ, a Christ alive again and with us after all the waste and wounds and blood and ashes of the cross.

A not particularly highly- educated group of men and women we so transformed by Easter that they gave us the New Testament and a world-wide community of faith.

The Resurrection we can see no more may matter less than the effect of our belief in it on our own lives. What Easter does to us is the ongoing miracle of Easter. It is the effect of Jesus and Christ on us that matters most of all. It is not becoming Christian that matters but what we become because we are Christians.

If Jesus is risen as the Christ, the point of this is that we emerge from the empty tomb of our lesser selves, from the wounds and ashes of our misdeeds into the Easter signs and sacraments which make us God’s beloved sons and daughters. Easter only happens to Christ so that it might happen to us.

The key question to consider is not whether Jesus rose from the dead but whether we did.