

April 11, 2004

Pascha

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Gospel stories of the Lord's Resurrection, viewed from an historical perspective, are difficult to reconcile with one another. Indeed, the differences in detail among them are perhaps more extensive than in any other stories in the Gospels. Matthew and Mark, for instance, seem familiar with no apparitions of the risen Jesus to the apostles except in Galilee, while Luke and John describe such apparitions taking place in Jerusalem. Likewise, just how many angels were there at the empty tomb? And how many times did Jesus appear to Mary Magdalene? Discrepancies on such matters are both numerous and perplexing.

I believe, however, that this inconsistency among the Resurrection reports, far from being an argument against their historicity, tends rather to favor it. That is to say, the jumble and disarray of the post-Resurrection accounts would be even more difficult to explain if those stories were deliberately fabricated to support a fraud. Fraudulent conspiracies are normally better organized. The tangled details in these stories are more readily explained, rather, as the varied responses we might expect among the friends of a man who rose from the dead one morning and came back to tell them about it. The narrative confusion itself indicates an underlying event of bewilderment and disorientation.

These same Resurrection stories, analyzed from a literary and theological perspective, appear to fall into two categories that it is useful to examine more closely.

The first category may be called kerygmatic. That is to say, some of the Resurrection accounts seem to have been part of the Church's apologetic witness to the world. In these stories there is a great deal of emphasis on the reliability of eyewitness testimony, much as there might be in a courtroom. Such stories stress the perceived physical reality of the Resurrection in documentable terms. This testimony has to be

clear and unmistakable, emphasizing the identity of the risen Jesus beyond doubt.

Indeed, before any of the Gospels were composed there was already an official list of qualified witnesses well known among the early Christians: "I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received . . . that He rose again according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, and then by the twelve; after that He was seen by more than 500 brethren at once. . . . After that He was seen by James, then by all the Apostles. And last of all He was seen by me" (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). One notes here the heavy emphasis on apostolic authority; in the main, the people listed here were official spokesmen for the Church. They were the established witnesses, to the world, of the Lord's Resurrection (cf. also Acts 1:21-22).

We find exactly this eye-witness kind of emphasis in a couple of the Gospel accounts (Luke 24:36-43; John 21:24-29). This is rare, nonetheless, and in the Gospels the apologetic interest is rather muted. For example, none of the evangelists describes the apparition of the risen Lord to either Peter or James alone, or to the "more than 500 brethren at once."

There is a second kind of post-Resurrection story in the Gospels, however, in which the emphasis is very different. To appreciate this difference, one may begin by noting just who is absent in that first type of story. Who was not named in Paul's list of the Resurrection's official witnesses? The women! But when we turn to the Gospels themselves, it is the myrrh-bearing women who are most prominent in the Resurrection stories. They are the first to see the risen Lord, and the apostles, whom Paul lists as the official witnesses, are described as skeptical of the women's report (Matthew 28:11; Mark 16:9-11; Luke 24:11,22-24).

We read, for instance, "Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene" (Mark 16:9). In the official list in 1 Corinthians 15, Mary Magdalene is not even mentioned. On the contrary, Paul says that the risen Jesus first "was seen by Cephas" (1 Corinthians 15:5). The contrast is striking.

That is to say, the interest and concern of the four Gospels seems to be less apologetic and more theological and devotional. What we have in the Gospels are the Church's cherished memories of that first Paschal morning and the delirious ensuing days of the new spring. We learn of Mary Magdalene's sentient recognition of Jesus' voice speaking her own name, the mysterious experience of the two disciples along the road and at the inn, and that morning encounter at the lakeside. We behold the Lord's feet embraced by those lying prostrate in His worship. We see that trembling finger extended to touch the wounded hand. These are the stories of believers meeting their risen Lord in the intimacy of worship and the sacraments.

©2004 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php