

Easter Sunday '17
Year A
April 16, 2017
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Years ago, I think I was in high school; I got a book from the library on the four Gospels. What it did was arrange the passion and resurrection narratives from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in parallel columns, side by side. What is striking when you read them that way are the similarities and the differences. Where the Matthew and Luke columns might have a few identical paragraphs next to each other, Mark and John might be blank. Such an arrangement invites careful reading. But what strikes you the most in such a study may depend on your predispositions.

Some notice the differences and say, “Well, what the heck! The Bible is full of contradictions! Who can believe it? It's obviously just all made up!”

By way of differences they could point to the resurrection accounts of Matthew and John. Matthew, which we read at the Easter vigil, tells of an angel coming down from heaven, rolling back the stone from the mouth of the tomb with a great earthquake, throwing the guards into a panic. The women see Jesus, who gives them a message for the apostles to meet him in Galilee.

The corresponding account from John, which we read on Easter morning, mentions only Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb, there are no angels or earthquake, she sees the stone rolled away and runs off to tell Peter and John who then come running to the tomb, go inside, see the burial cloths, then go home. Mary remains at the tomb and then sees the risen Christ.

Now, people inclined not to believe can sound pretty persuasive when they get working with these differences in the four Gospels. However, suppose you got four reports about a collision at the intersection of Locust and Mulberry-- one from each driver, one from a kid who was riding by on his bike, and one from a senior citizen who was standing on the porch of the funeral home. Would there be differences in what they had to say? Definitely. Would you then conclude, “Well, these people are all contradicting each other? Who knows what to believe? It might be all made up. There probably was no accident at all”?

Nobody would reach such a conclusion. No. You would say, “Well, each perceived it in their own way, of course, and they each have their own way of expressing themselves, but they wouldn't all be talking about it if nothing happened. With a careful review of the similarities, and the reasons for the differences, we'll be able to put together a reliable understanding of what actually happened.”

Just so with the four Gospels. If they all agreed perfectly about all the details wouldn't you then be suspicious? – about some collusion that must have gone on, about some fabrication that was being foisted on the public? But the differences between the Gospels are just what you would expect from human witnesses to a real event, and their similarities enable us to put together a reliable understanding of what happened-- Christ rose from the dead. On the first day of the week his tomb was found empty, various of the disciples inspected and wondered what it meant. Then he began to appear to them alive-- sometimes one on one, sometimes in small groups, sometimes in large groups, in different combinations in different locations over a period of fifty days. The reports all agree that it was the same Jesus they had known, and that he was somehow different, unaffected by the trauma he'd been through, in fact unaffected by time, space, gravity, or any of the other laws of nature that we take to be so absolute.

The four Gospels, being just as they are, with their differences and similarities, are the most convincing testimony we could possibly have that what we celebrate today really happened; and that, consequently, he is alive and with us here today as we celebrate. So, let us celebrate! Happy Easter!