

The Resurrection and the Jesus Seminar: A Sermon with Commentary

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I. A Sermon

On Not Holding on, or Witnessing the Resurrection

Acts 10: 34-43, I Corinthians 15: 1-11, John 20: 1-18

They rush to the tomb. It is empty. Then we are told the disciples returned home. Returned home! How odd. They seem almost as stupid as those two in the Gospel of Luke who say they heard Jesus has risen from the dead yet they are out there on the Emmaus road leaving Jerusalem. Strange behavior to be sure. You have to wonder what the disciples talked about when they got home. How could people as dull as the disciples have ever come up with something like the resurrection?

I suspect we think it must have gone something like this. They begin to talk with one another about their time with Jesus. "Was it not exciting? He was really something. Do you remember how he cleansed the temple? Strong stuff. And then there were all those miracles. Raised Lazarus no less. Moreover his teachings were so insightful. Really gave you something to chew on. Just thinking about it makes you feel like he is still among us. Yes, by God, it is like he is really here. Why I believe if we just remember hard enough he will still be here. My God, if we do not forget him it will be like he is still alive."

I say we are tempted to think this kind of conversation happened because, like the disciples, we would like to think that resurrection does not mean our world has been turned upside down. We would like to celebrate Jesus' "resurrection" and go on living within the presuppositions and habits that sustain our lives. That is why we are tempted to try to "explain" the resurrection. Our explanations are the way we, like Mary Magdalene, try to "hold on" to Jesus.

But Jesus refuses to let us hold on. He just will not submit to our explanations of the resurrection. For as our scriptures for today make clear we cannot explain the resurrection. The resurrection explains us. For if God did not raise Jesus on the third day then our existence as church, the fact that we gathered here last night and this morning are unintelligible. This is about God. The reason we know that Jesus is very God and very man is that Jesus could not have raised himself from the dead. God raised Jesus from the dead. This is not the resuscitation of a corpse. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but Lazarus was still to die. Jesus lives with God.

Resurrection cannot, therefore, be a symbol for the renewal of life even the renewal of life in the spring. Remember for many Christians Easter comes during winter or autumn. The resurrection is not butterflies breaking from their cocoons. No, the resurrection is God raising this man Jesus, God's very son, from the dead. This is Jesus who after the resurrection eats and drinks with Peter and the disciples. You do not eat and drink with a symbol. Jesus, raised by God from the dead, is the same Jesus that called disciples, entered Jerusalem, and was crucified.

That Jesus is the one raised from the dead does not require explanation. Rather Jesus raised requires witnesses. But not just any witnesses. That is why in Acts Peter says that after God raised Jesus on the third day, "God allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses." Paul is equally clear in I Corinthians that there was a definite order to Jesus' appearances. "He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

Now I suppose what it means to be God is that you do not have to explain your guest list. But it is interesting to ask why these folks? Why Mary, Peter, the disciples, the five hundred, James and the apostles—and even Paul? I think quite simply it is these people that are able to recognize that the resurrected Christ is Jesus of Nazareth. Mary Magdalene, about whom we know very little in the Gospel of John except she was with Jesus' mother and the other Mary as witnesses to the crucifixion, thinks Jesus is the gardener until he says her name. She recognizes him instantly, becoming a witness who then witnesses to the disciples—"I have seen the Lord."

To witness the resurrection of Jesus it seems required that you are able to identify the one resurrected with the one, as Peter says in Acts, who came to the people of Israel preaching peace, who was baptized by John, anointed with the Holy Spirit, did good by healing all who are oppressed by the devil, and was put to death on a tree. He was, moreover, crucified because in his work, in his person, he was the Kingdom come. Resurrection does not mean that the crucifixion was some kind of misunderstanding that we can now leave behind because after all in the end everything came out all right. Crucifixion was not some kind of mistake, but rather the fearful result of Jesus' preaching, his miracles, his calling disciples, his very life. The resurrected Christ is the crucified Jesus.

But crucifixion names not failure, but triumph. That it is the crucified Messiah who is raised makes possible, as Peter says in Acts, that Jesus commanded that they "preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." Paul is equally insistent that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" thus making possible our faith in the one alone worthy of worship. Crucifixion is not some event in the past, but now implanted in God's very heart.

Forgiveness, crucifixion, resurrection it seems are inseparably tied together, but it is important that we understand how they are so tied. I fear often that when we are told that through Jesus' resurrection we are offered forgiveness, we try to think of ourselves as particularly sinful in order to deserve such forgiveness. Ironically that is one of the ways we try to hold on to Jesus, making him submit to our understanding. No doubt we are sinners, but the forgiveness that God offers in the resurrection cannot be reduced to our pathetic sins. The forgiveness wrought through cross and resurrection is about the kingdom Jesus proclaimed and in proclaiming became. When we lose the vital connection between Jesus' life, crucifixion, and resurrection we are tempted to make Jesus' resurrection something less than the inauguration of God's kingdom of forgiveness.

God raised Jesus on the third day changing forever the way things are. No longer

is it necessary to live as if there is no alternative to the powers that feed on our fears, our lusts, our hopelessness. There is an alternative kingdom to that rule of darkness—it is called forgiveness. To be forgiven is not to be told that no matter what we may have done or did not do, it is all right with God. No, to be forgiven is to be made part of a community, a history, that would not, could not exist if Jesus were not God's Christ, raised from the dead. To be forgiven means that we are now, through our baptism given names, names that make it possible for Jesus to call us to recognition.

This is the miracle we celebrate today. This is the miracle we are today. Like Paul we were not followers of Jesus prior to the resurrection. Yet by God's grace we have been made witnesses to the resurrection. We know it is the resurrected Jesus, moreover, because we have been following him all year. We have waited for the birth, celebrated that birth, been baptized with him, heard him teach, marveled at his miracles, entered Jerusalem, and witnessed his crucifixion. We have been able to do this because through Jesus' resurrection we have been made witnesses, we have been made God's church.

We have been made such through this resurrection meal so that the world may know there is an alternative to the kingdoms built on death and destruction. In this meal we continue to eat and drink with our bodily Lord who came preaching peace. That Jesus is the resurrected Lord makes it possible for Paula to be our priest, representing Christ for us, offering Christ's invitation to enjoy this meal he alone could make possible. That Jesus is the resurrected Lord means in our eating and drinking we become for the world part of God's very life for the world. What a privilege. What a wonder. He is risen! He is risen indeed! Come let us eat and drink with our lively Lord who by resisting our grasp holds us fast in God's very life.

II. A Commentary: What's Wrong with the Jesus Seminar?

The sermon you have just read is the first sermon I have had the honor to preach at Easter. My minister's husband had a stroke just prior to Holy Week, and she asked my wife, Paula Gilbert, to celebrate during the services of Holy Week and requested that I preach on Easter Sunday. To be asked to preach on Easter was an opportunity welcomed because I seldom preach much less have the privilege to preach on Easter.

I confess the Jesus Seminar was not foremost in my mind as I worked on the sermon, but as I read the sermon again, it is clear the news about the Jesus Seminar that was appearing in the popular press was influencing how I shaped the sermon. For if there is any place where we try to "hold on to Jesus," it's through the kind of work exemplified in the Jesus Seminar. With, perhaps, the best intentions in the world the Jesus Seminar is committed to making Jesus explicable within the naturalistic metaphysical presumptions that shape as well as reflect the practices characteristic of modernity.

I realize this is a harsh criticism, but it must be made. Moreover, I think I am not mischaracterizing the intentions of the participants in the Jesus Seminar. For example, consider Marcus Borg's response to Will Willimon's recent article on the Jesus Seminar in *Christian Century*.¹ Answering Willimon's suggestion that Borg cannot place Easter within his system of thought, Borg says:

My question to Willimon is: What do you mean by Easter? Do you mean a supernatural intervention by God which transformed the corpse of Jesus

and left the tomb empty? Or that the followers of Jesus (then and now) experienced him as a living reality after his death, but in a radically new way—experiences which led them to conclude not only that Jesus still lived/lives but also was/is the Lord? If the latter, then we agree. If the former, I want to ask why that particular understanding of Easter is important. What is at stake in the supernatural interventionist physical understanding of the Resurrection?

My sermon above is meant to show what a misshapen alternative Borg presents to Willimon. Notice the language Borg uses: “supernatural intervention by God which transformed the corpse of Jesus and left the tomb empty.” The employment of the word “supernatural” reproduces a God and a correlative metaphysics that presumes that the world as we know it is not God’s good creation. Rather, we exist in a world of cause and effect which make resurrections unintelligible. But if the world is God’s good creation, the resurrection of Jesus is not some supernatural event that is inexplicable; rather, resurrection is exactly what one should expect of the One who moves the sun and the stars and can be found in the belly of Mary.

Resurrection cannot be avoided if we are to understand the character of the text we call the New Testament. It has been the presumption of the Jesus Seminar that the life of Jesus was somehow distorted by the church’s conviction that Jesus was God’s resurrected. Yet that is to treat the New Testament separate from the theological convictions that make the New Testament intelligible. As Luke Johnson asks in his wonderful book, *The Real Jesus*, “If Jesus is, by virtue of his resurrection, powerfully alive in God, how does the retrojection of that understanding distort ‘the real Jesus’?”² Of course, the materials we find in the Gospels are shaped by the resurrection. We would not want them nor should we be interested in them if they were not.

I’m aware that Borg will simply say that I am simply asserting a “supernatural interventionist physical understanding of the Resurrection,” but that is exactly not what I am doing. Rather, I’m calling attention to how the church’s acknowledgement of God’s resurrection of Jesus is a reality-making claim. It’s not, as Borg would have it, that the disciples and other followers of Jesus had experiences which led them to conclude that Jesus still lived and lives; but rather they had not just an experience but as Robert Jenson reminds us in his *Systematic Theology*, they had the experience of something.³ Put simply, the resurrection is only explicable to the extent it requires the invoking of the full doctrine of the Trinity. Again in Jenson’s language, “The Spirit who raises the Son is the Spirit of the Father, and had already rested on the Son. The unity of the crucified Son with the risen Son is positive in the essential unity between this Father and the Spirit.”⁴ The resurrection accordingly means nothing less than that Jesus was not only freed from death but from the possibility of dying. This resurrection is moreover the bodily resurrection, for otherwise Christ is not available to us.⁵

This body, called church, is why I emphasize in my sermon the importance of the witnesses to the resurrection. The resurrected Christ must be identifiable as Jesus who called the disciples, to Mary and Martha, and was crucified, dead, and buried. Whatever inconsistencies exist between the various Gospels about how Jesus’ life was to be told, there is no inconsistency that the One who lived that life is the resurrected Christ. Of course that Christ, as the appearance narratives make clear, is not the same as the earthly Jesus. He comes and goes as he wills and he cannot be held on to. Yet

it is the unwavering witness of the disciples that it is the same Jesus.

The Jesus Seminar presumes that Jesus can be held on to through the work of history. But by “history” is meant a cause and effect sequence that requires any intervention by God be called “supernatural.” It is but a sign of our parochialism that we fail to understand what a limited view of history that is. Indeed, you cannot even make sense, as Luke Timothy Johnson argues in *The Real Jesus*, of the kind of narratives that constitute historical work on such metaphysically reductionist grounds.⁶

The great sadness about the current controversies swirling around the Jesus Seminar is that they are such a distraction from the important theological challenges facing the church. That many desire, like those in the Jesus Seminar, to give an account of Jesus that will make him “interesting” without having to accept the church’s affirmation “this was the Son of God” is the heart of our difficulty. We will not be able to go forward as long as we try to answer the challenge of the Jesus Seminar on its own terms. Of course it is important to take up their historical points, point by point, and others more skillful than I, such as Luke Johnson and Richard Hays, have done that.⁷ But far more important is for us to get on with the business of telling of the real Jesus, that is, the resurrected Christ.

Notes

¹ William Willimon, “Modern Distractions,” *Christian Century* (November 5, 1997) 1009-1011, and Marcus Borg, “Postmodern Revisioning,” *Christian Century* (November 5, 1997) 1011

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 41. The “real Jesus” for Johnson is the resurrected Jesus.

³ Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology, I, The True God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 200.

⁴ Jenson, 200.

⁵ Jenson puts the question of the bodily resurrection of Jesus this way: “The organism that was Jesus’ availability—that was his body—until he was killed would have as a corpse continued to be an availability of this person, of the kind of tombs and body of the dead always are. It would have been precisely a *relic*, such as the saints of all religions have. Something other than sacrament and church would have located the Lord for us, would have provided a direction for devotion, and that devotion would have been to a saint, and so would have been something other than faith and obedience to a living Lord. The tomb, we may cautiously judge, had to be empty after the Resurrection for the Resurrection to be what it is. We can, of course, say nothing at all about what anyone would have seen who was in the tomb between burial and the first appearance. If the tomb marked by the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is indeed where Christ lay, it is empty not by inadvertence but as the Temple of Israel was empty” (p. 206).

⁶ It is to Jenson’s great credit he sees that the resurrection is not “historical” but history making. As such we should expect to find, as the Gospels and Paul exemplify, that Jesus was flesh and blood. Indeed I sometimes think historical criticism was one of the ways God found to prevent the almost inexorable movement of Protestantism into gnosticism and docetic Christologies. The means have unfortunately become an end in themselves.

⁷ See Richard Hays’ devastating review of *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* in *First Things* 43 (May 1994): 43-48.