

March 27, Easter Sunday: 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12

Sunday's Coming Premium

March 10, 2016

In January, we were introduced to Planet Nine. This new addition to our solar system is thought to be ten times the mass of Earth and 50 billion miles away. Scientists from the California Institute of Technology explained that, while they have not actually found the planet, they are sure it exists—because nothing else accounts for the way objects in the outer part of the solar system move. “It must be there,” said one astronomer. “Nothing else could exert such influence.”

I only recently came to grips with the fact that Pluto is no longer a planet, and now I’m told there is another heavenly body I must fit into my cosmology. What will I do with “My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pies,” the mnemonic device for naming the planets that I learned in school? It isn’t easy to give up what I learned as a child. But sometimes the accepted facts must change in light of new evidence.

This is essentially the message of Easter. The women who walk to the tomb in the predawn light think they know the facts. Luke’s Gospel tells us that they have seen it all: the crucifixion, the death, and the burial (23:55). They know who they are looking for and where to find him. Carrying spices and ointments, they come to do what they have done many times before—clean a dead body and prepare it for burial.

Luke grounds the whole narrative in tangible details. There is the rock-hewn tomb, the linen cloth, the heavy stone, the fragrant spices. The reader can easily imagine the place and the time.

Then things fall off the map. The stone has been rolled away, and the tomb is empty.

The synoptic accounts of the resurrection differ in many ways, but they agree on two things: the body of Jesus is not in the tomb, and the women are told, “He is not here; he has been raised.” This angelic testimony is hard to believe, but it is not without precedent. The women are reminded that this is precisely what Jesus said would happen, “that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and

on the third day rise again” (Luke 24:7). According to Luke, the women remember his words and believe.

If only it were so simple for us. Like many mainline Protestant churches, my congregation is deeply committed to social justice. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and take the side of the oppressed. We welcome the marginalized, acknowledge our privilege, and strive to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God”(Mic. 6:8). From this perspective, the crucifixion is interpreted as a political act—the powers and principalities are trying to silence Jesus and his radical message of mercy and justice for all. Everything makes sense—until we come to the empty tomb.

The resurrection is a problem for post-Enlightenment Christians. We like our faith to be tangible, practical, and most of all rational. There is no room in our cosmology for a resurrected body, because such a claim flies in the face of reason and science.

Yet the problem of finding the words “He is risen!” unbelievable goes back much farther. First-century Christians knew little about biology, but they had their own doubts about the resurrection. We know this from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. In true Pauline form, he constructs a robust theological argument for the resurrection Jesus, insisting that if Christ is not raised, then all is lost. In a time when people were suffering and dying for their faith, a Christ who was not resurrected offered no hope: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

For Paul, the resurrection is not just one part of the story. It is the reality in which the whole gospel narrative unfolds. Too much is at stake for the resurrection *not* to be true.

There is a lot at stake here and now, too. Every day I see people putting their Christian faith into action, sometimes at great personal risk. They deliver meals in dangerous neighborhoods. They visit people convicted of violent crimes. They march in protest and dare to declare that black lives matter. For their sakes, I hold fast to the bodily resurrection. As Tom Long writes, “A Christ whose resurrection occurs only in our minds has no right to call us to put our bodies on the line for justice.”

I know the Easter story can be a burden to modern Christians, but it is a burden I willingly carry. Theologian John S. Whale once said that “the Gospels don’t explain the resurrection; the resurrection explains the Gospels.” I agree. As crazy as it

sounds, I believe in the resurrection. I believe Jesus rose on the third day— even though I cannot prove it. We have no firsthand account of the event; no one witnessed the first gasp for breath or the shudder of the limbs as the heart beat once more. No one was with Jesus when he shrugged off the linen cloth and stepped out of the tomb. No one saw it happen.

Just as no one has seen Planet Nine. But what else could exert such influence?

Only the resurrection could turn cowardly Peter into a preacher of renown, could transform Saul into the great missionary Paul. Only the resurrection could turn ordinary women and men into saints and martyrs, preachers and prophets, activists and organizers. Generation after generation, we make our way to the empty tomb and hear the words that rock our world: He is not here. He is risen.