

The same old debate about the Easter story and whether or not to believe it

Accept the resurrection or don't. Either way, you're the boss.

by [Matt Fitzgerald](#) in the [June 19, 2019](#) issue



Charles Ricketts, *The Holy Women and the Angel of the Resurrection*, oil on canvas, 1910.

Just before Easter, as part of his intermittent series of conversations with religious leaders, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof [asked Union Theological Seminary president Serene Jones about the resurrection](#). Kristof, who seems to be on a spiritual quest, asked Jones, “Do you think of Easter as a literal flesh-and-blood resurrection?” and added, “I have problems with that.”

After some back and forth, Jones replied, “For me, the message of Easter is that love is stronger than life or death. That’s a much more awesome claim than that they put Jesus in the tomb and three days later he wasn’t there. For Christians for whom the physical resurrection becomes a sort of obsession, that seems to me to be a pretty wobbly faith.”

When I was her student, Professor Jones had a gift for presenting the shifting emphases of Christian thought. She taught us to see how the best theology of a given age met the challenges of its era. Why would she move against this flow, retreating back into the 19th-century mind of [Adolf von Harnack](#)?

That isn’t a rhetorical question. I worry that I missed some subtlety, either in the classroom 20 years ago or on the opinion page last month. Or perhaps Kristof’s thickheaded questions left Jones without room for any subtlety at all.

In any case, my surprise turned to dismay when I read the comments her words provoked. Predictably, many *Times* readers loved what they saw as a “bold” embrace of centuries-old liberal orthodoxies. But it was the cocksure umbrage of conservative Christianity that burned up the comment section. “She isn’t a Christian.” “She doesn’t believe in God.”

And thus modernity’s wearisome debate grinds on. We have placed ourselves in a ridiculous bind. Religious sophisticates deny the resurrection and then try to build a flimsy faith on the back of the very symbols that flimsy faith derides. True believers accept the resurrection by putting on a pair of blinders that block out the modern world. You believe or you don’t. (“I think I believe in the resurrection,” a church member once confessed to me, “but I worry that if I had to take a polygraph exam about my faith, I’d fail.”)

It’s a binary argument—but the two sides only seem like opposites. The truth is, both leave the believer in charge. The choice is yours: accept the resurrection or don’t. Either way, you’re the boss.

In regards to God, everyone in this argument seems to commit what Avivah Zornberg calls “the obscenity of understanding.” And no one in this argument seems ready to acknowledge that God’s boundless work might defy the boundaries of the human mind.

Resurrection faith within Christian community is far more fluid—and much more urgent. The day before Easter, I led a funeral for a church family’s baby. She died during delivery. The funeral was in her parents’ backyard. As we buried her ashes, I read Paul’s sneering denunciation of the grave. In my 19 years as a liberal Protestant pastor, plenty of people have asked me if I believe in the resurrection. No one has ever asked me that question at a funeral.

The baby’s extended family had come in from Wisconsin. Her parents and their relatives stood together weeping. They were stunned, unspeaking. When I was done, they carried dirt with their bare hands, closing the grave they’d dug on Good Friday. Even her little cousins held a silent reverence.

Our church holds two services on Easter Sunday. The second one is better. We get the kinks ironed out, and the crowd is much larger—things get gleeful. I told the baby’s grieving family this. Then they showed up early for the early service. They sat toward the front of the sanctuary. I didn’t see a lot of laughter from the pews they filled. As far as I could tell, they said nothing to the other worshipers nearby. But as the service unfolded, I began to hear them singing strongly. And I saw the little cousins paying close attention when the resurrection story was read.

The oldest version of that story tells us that Mary, Mary, and Salome set out early that day. When they found that Jesus’ tomb was empty, the women did not join an argument. The first witnesses came to Easter wrecked by grief, and when they encountered the possibility of resurrection, they were astonished, beside themselves, and afraid. The Gospel of Mark says that “they said nothing to anyone.”

In an era marked and torn by religious overconfidence and atheistic certitude, this is a faith to emulate. Mary, Mary, and Salome didn’t rush to put up doctrinal borders, barring other grief-stricken friends of Jesus from claiming an Easter faith. Nor did they try to turn their experience into a metaphor for some larger, “awesome,” abstract truth.

They did not think they were in charge of Easter. Perhaps they knew that there is no such thing as grief or love or even hope without flesh, without what Thomas Merton

calls “a body of broken bones.” Perhaps, living close to the bone, these women knew [the truth Claudia Rankine names](#): the body is a “threshold” across which whatever we know “passes into consciousness.” Rankine writes that “the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight.” Perhaps the women knew that resurrection is resurrection for a reason.

Or maybe they were simply too tired and too wonderstruck to argue. Mark paints a picture of wounded awe: “They said nothing to anyone.” The first witnesses could not explain the resurrection, and they could not explain it away. When their pain was met by the incomprehensible work of God, they chose to hold a reverent silence. Hilda Doolittle said it perfectly [in a poem from 1946](#): “In resurrection there is confusion / if we start to argue.” Imagine if the *New York Times* and the critics in its comment section had that kind of faith, or the wisdom to make space for it.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Resurrection for a reason.”