

May 14, 2006

## **The Sunday of the Paralytic**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Inasmuch as Jesus "was raised again for our justification" (Romans 4:25), it is entirely proper to study and ponder the mystery of the Lord's Resurrection as part of theology in the strict sense. Specifically, such study pertains to soteriology, the theology of salvation. In addition, however, the Resurrection of Jesus is likewise a proper theme of Christian apologetics, that theological discipline which defends the faith and supports its proclamation to the world

An inspection of the New Testament, moreover, shows that the apologetic approach to the Resurrection actually came first; the early believers proclaimed the *fact* of the Resurrection before they reflected on its soteriological meaning. In the earliest Christian preaching, the Resurrection was emphasized as probative before it was pondered as redemptive.

St. Peter's first sermon demonstrates this point. With respect to the Resurrection, Peter made two points in that sermon: the historical fact that God raised Jesus from the dead and the fulfillment of biblical prophecy by that fact (Acts 2:24-31). In that sermon the apostle said not a word about the redemptive meaning of the Resurrection. He concentrated entirely on the historical fact itself, "of which," he said, "we are all witnesses" (2:32).

The apostolic writings also record that the Resurrection was the point at which the first enemies of the Gospel directed their attack. In order to explain Jesus' empty tomb, those responsible for His murder "gave a large sum of money to the soldiers," bribing them to claim that Jesus' disciples came, while the guard was sleeping, to take away His corpse. This explanation of the empty tomb, Matthew wrote, "is commonly reported among the Jews until this day" (Matthew 28:12-15).

Early Christian apologists recognized, of course, that the empty tomb itself proved nothing. So much was this the case that the first Christian to find the tomb empty presumed, not that Jesus had risen, but that His body had been stolen (John 20:1-2,13-15). Common sense and rationality testify that this was a normal assessment. If we find a grave empty, after all, it is not our first thought that the dead person arose. We suppose, rather, that someone took away the corpse. Hence, Jesus' empty tomb by itself had no probative value, which is why it receives relatively little attention in the New Testament.

Alas, there are modern critics that draw a completely skewed inference from the New Testament's comparative lack of interest in the empty tomb. The empty tomb is not emphasized in the New Testament, these critics claim, because it

was not important to the early Christians. Nor, they often enough go on to assert, should the empty tomb be important for us. It is not uncommon for such critics to avow, in fact, that the "essence" of the Christian faith is quite compatible with the tomb's *not* being empty!

It should be obvious that suggestions like this are incompatible with the proclamation of the apostles. In fact, these assertions are a kind of delirium. Even the earliest enemies of the Gospel did not dispute that the tomb was empty. If the New Testament lays no special stress on the empty tomb, therefore, the reason must be sought elsewhere. And the reason surely has to do with the fact that an empty tomb doesn't prove anything to anybody. It not only has no theological significance; it is also without apologetic weight. It doesn't explain anything. On the contrary, it must *be* explained.

The correct explanation for Jesus' empty tomb came through the physical experience of those who testified that Jesus, risen from the dead, had been seen (1 Corinthians 15:4-8; Mark 1:9,14) and touched (Matthew 1:9; Luke 24:39; John 20:27) by them. Far from being hallucinations brought on by wishful thinking, the physical manifestations of the risen Jesus went directly contrary to the rational, commonsense expectations of those who saw Him.

Perhaps the most important thing to observe about that physical evidence of the risen Lord is that it was conveyed to--indeed, overwhelmingly forced itself upon---those who were deeply reluctant to take it seriously. To a man, the first witnesses of the risen Jesus were at first skeptical of their experience. They could be convinced only when the risen Jesus "presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs" (Acts 1:3). They came finally to believe in the Resurrection, only when the undeniable evidence coerced their assent.

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