

EASTER

Have you ever wondered why the stone was rolled back? After all, if Jesus can pass through locked doors, why would he need the stone to be rolled back by the angel? Was it done to simply convince the women and other disciples of his resurrection? If so, it seems like a pretty risky tactic, doesn't it? In fact, it would seem to play into the rumor that Jesus' disciples rolled back the stone themselves and stole the body in order to claim his resurrection. Indeed, it is precisely this that Mary Magdalene initially believes has happened, namely that someone has taken the body of her Lord. Of all those to see the empty tomb only John sees something that leads him to conclude that Jesus has risen from the dead as he said he would.

The accounts of Jesus' resurrection are among the most confused and muddled of any in the Bible and abound with inconsistencies. When he first appears to Mary, she mistakes him for the gardener and only recognizes him when he calls her by name. He sends her to tell the others that he has risen and will go before them to Galilee; yet in John's Gospel he appears to all assembled in the upper room in Jerusalem on that first Easter morning. A week later, he appears again in the same location to convince Thomas that what the others say is true. He can pass through locked doors, but can eat and drink solid food. He has a glorified body, yet Thomas can insert his hand into his wounded side. Luke has him ascend to heaven from Jerusalem, whereas Matthew places this event on a mountaintop in Galilee. For sure, everything about these appearances is new and shocking and Jesus himself is revealed as radically changed and yet strangely familiar. And remember, Jesus was a perfected human being before his death! What in the world will we look like and act like and be like after our own resurrection? Will we be at all the same? Probably not.

How might we change, I wonder? In baptism, enormous spiritual changes are wrought as the soul is regenerated in the image and likeness of Christ, yet all of these momentous realities are invisible and seminal; it is as if the seed of a mighty sequoia has been planted in the dark of our small and constrained hearts. Resurrection, through death and the afterlife, completes our transformation into new creatures. Many metaphors are used to describe this phenomenon. One is the tired old cliché of a caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly. The slug-like body of the crawler wraps itself in the death of the cocoon and then after much interior change, the butterfly emerges. Same stuff, different animal altogether!

It's really not a bad metaphor at all, but it has lost much due to overuse. Instead, I like the idea of the phoenix. The phoenix, as many of you know, was a mythical firebird appearing in the legends of several cultures as diverse as the Persians, the Romans and the Chinese. This bird is a familiar symbol of rebirth, immortality and renewal, but its story is particularly attractive for our purposes. This is what happens: in order to be reborn to eternal life, the bird must die, but it does so in spectacular fashion. When ready for death, it sets itself on its nest, which also stands in for its funeral pyre, and bursts into flame. Everything of the old bird is consumed in the fire, including all its possessions with which it has constructed its final home. It is out of the wreck of the remaining ashes that the new creature is born. Where the metaphor falters, however, is that the new bird looks just like the old bird. Perhaps if we could have the caterpillar burst into flame with a butterfly emerging from the ashes, we might be even closer to what I'm getting at!

What is instructive here is the fact that in order for the new life to emerge, the old must be totally consumed in the fire of transformation; nothing can be saved of the old; everything must go! For you and I, this includes all of our attachments, of whatever type: possessions, memories, relationships, ideas, opinions and even cherished beliefs. Thought and memory and idea and all other things to which we

cling must give way to the actual reality of new life, and until we are ready to let go of them, we cannot enter in. These consuming flames are therefore uniquely symbolic of the spiritual life, even that life which continues after death, and it is no wonder that the Church so often pictures purgatory as a place of flames. Hell, on the other hand, is best thought of as Dante did – a realm of ice where all is frozen and unyielding.

Such a view of resurrection has immediate consequences for how we live out our current existence. The flames of true change must be kindled now, or they will never come. If our long path home doesn't begin today, it never will and it is to the ice that we will go; indeed, we will go there because we prefer old, encrusted images of our self to the dynamic, yet frighteningly new, reality that Christian life would offer us. Jesus' resurrection is a promise and a challenge; our own resurrection must effectively begin now, or it will never take place. That is the promise and the doom of Easter and the very nature of Christian life on earth.