

The resurrection: meaning and credibility

How fundamental theology has demonstrated the truth of the resurrection-faith has changed over time. The apologetic emphasis on the empty tomb is no longer adequate. Rather, the credibility of the resurrection-faith is founded on the power of the kerygma of the Risen Christ and its relationship to the life, message, and praxis of the historical Jesus.

"Auferstehung Jesu. Bedeutung und Glaubwürdigkeit," *Theologie der Gegenwart* (2003): 40–50.

Fundamental theology's central concern, among other things, is Jesus' resurrection. The Easter event was not a peripheral but a crucial part of the NT witness: "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain" (1 Cor 15:14). The most important statement of the Christian creed, the resurrection has been considered significant all through church history.

In modern times Jesus' resurrection has been reassessed and has increasingly moved back into the forefront of apologetic interests. In conversation with the European Enlightenment, neoscholastic apologetics took up the truth claims of Christian revelation and based the neoscholastic argument on the Easter event, where the opened, empty tomb played an overarching role (I. Broer).

The meaning of the empty tomb

Especially in the area of *demonstratio Christiana*, apologists tried to establish the truth of the Christian faith, in particular that Christianity was the true religion. They pointed out that the Christian faith rested on the divine revelation that Jesus of Nazareth was the eschatological revealer of God—proof enough for Christianity's rationality and truth. However, because the content of

revelation was considered supernatural, such proof had to be brought into the realm of human reason, especially where natural causality was replaced by external power in unexplained and prominent ways. This was, above all, true for Jesus' resurrection, the culmination of all miracles and prophecies. Independent of faith, there were objective, historically verifiable bases for legitimating Jesus' mission. Primary among these was the resurrection, which seemed to be established by the fact of the empty tomb.

Today historical-critical exegesis makes it incontrovertibly clear that the biblical Easter narratives are unable to provide the kind of evidence demanded by apologetics, and evidence based on the empty tomb is no longer convincing. Just as miracles in the NT do not have an apologetic function but a sign-symbol function that corresponds to the in-breaking of God's kingdom, so the empty tomb functions not as compelling proof but as a sign that demands faith—and may strengthen it. The empty tomb, then, is not a compelling argument for the resurrection in the NT or for today. Even a historical verification that the tomb actually had been found empty, would still not prove Jesus' resurrection because the question of how the tomb became empty would re-

main unanswered. There were no witnesses to the resurrection itself, and thus it is not a historical issue: "an empty tomb...is not the unconditional presupposition for the existence of a glorified body" (J. Kremer). The truth of the resurrection cannot be proved from the empty tomb—i.e., the empty tomb does not cause the Easter faith. Generally speaking, every historical datum is an ambivalent phenomenon, which is why the NT presents various interpretations of the empty tomb (Mt 28:11–15; Jn 20:15). Furthermore, theologically, the empty tomb is not proof of the Christian faith because, on one hand, the Easter event is involved in world history and, on the other, it is not a purely historical fact that can be substantiated by immanent categories. Jesus' resurrection is completely without analogy; it transcends what is historically ascertainable, surmounts all historical evidence. Thus, its truth cannot be reduced to faith statements, as happened in church apologetics. Unambiguous support for the empty tomb is based first on the NT Easter kerygma that is joined to the person of the earthly Jesus and, above all, to the appearances of the Risen Christ. The heart of the apostolic proclamation is the confession that "God raised Jesus from the dead." Initially, this Easter message was proclaimed without any reference to the empty, opened tomb, probably because the resurrection event was not described but was expressed in various phrases, analogies, and metaphors: "arisen," "awakened," "made alive," "justified," "exalted," "appointed Son of God," "Jesus is Lord (Kyrios)."

In the NT the credibility of Jesus' resurrection is grounded in the epiphanies of the Easter Christ and especially in the disciples' witness to the Easter event.

If Jesus' resurrection is both the object *and* the foundation of faith, then questions arise about *causality* (How did the resurrection faith originate historically? Where

is its source? What are its origins?) and in *fundamental theology* (How can the truth of Jesus' resurrection be established? What role do the Easter epiphanies play? What does Jesus' resurrection mean for the disciples' faith, and what meaning does the resurrection have for people's lives?).

On the one hand, the NT's Easter kerygma is caused by different and not clearly ascertainable reasons; on the other hand, "the tomb [surely] was not the decisive factor" (J. Gnllka) for the early church's faith. Consequently, in what follows we will not deal with the causal questions, but with the fundamental theological issues of what the resurrection meant for the disciples' faith and how Jesus' resurrection can be credibly understood.

Confirmation and ground of faith

The central message of Jesus' proclamation was that with his appearance the in-breaking of God's kingdom occurred. Jesus, however, not only spoke about God's kingdom, but he lived the reality and presence of salvation and taught his followers this new way of life, this "renewing of the mind" (Rom 12:2). Thus, he implicitly raised the claim that he was the divine self-mediation in person, the end-time revelation of God, and the expected Messiah. This claim became abundantly clear in his incredible statements, his forgiving of sins, his eating with sinners, his call to discipleship, his prayers to Abba.

Jesus' revelatory claims were radically called into question by his death on the cross: What did his death say about his divine mission? What did it have to do with the proclamation of God's kingdom? These questions are answered only in God's intervention in the Easter event. Only from that vantage point is the darkness of the cross illumined, and only from that perspective is it possible to discern the extent to which God, in Jesus, was Im-

manuel. God could be Immanuel only if he remained with us beyond death. Finally, God had to show that he was faithful to the promise of the power of his name (Ex 3:14). The innermost essence of God reached the apex of divine grace in the cross. The cross proved to be the final self-revelation of God, the last and highest self-outpouring (Phil 2:5–8).

From the Easter perspective, Jesus' cross is not God's failure, but the confirmation and "justification" (2 Cor 1:19–22; 1 Tm 3:16) of Jesus' indirect claim of being God's self-revelation. Easter is the unambiguous confirmation of Jesus' mission; here God proves his faithfulness in love and identifies definitively with Jesus and his cause. From a christological perspective, the resurrection confirms what *was already present before Easter*: the implicit revelatory claim of Jesus. From the christological perspective, it is not the confirmation itself that is christologically decisive but the *object* of the confirmation, directly from which come faith and confession. One can avoid an adoptionistic misunderstanding if the confirmatory character of Jesus' resurrection is located in the faith of Jesus' followers and not in Jesus' divine sonship. What is confirmed is unconditional trust in the God of Jesus Christ.

The meaning of the resurrection is overestimated if one sees more in it than a "mere" confirmation of faith in Jesus of Nazareth—if, for example, the resurrection is understood as a sign that first legitimates faith in Jesus, or if it is interpreted in relationship to christology as the fulfillment of Jesus' proclamation of God's power. According to Wolfhart Pannenberg,

There is no reason for the assumption that Jesus' claim to authority taken by itself justified faith in him. On the contrary, the pre-Easter Jesus' claim to authority stands from the begin-

ning in relationship to the question of the future verification of his message through the occurrence of the future judgment of the Son of Man according to the attitude taken by men toward Jesus. (*Jesus—God and Man*)

Pannenberg thus says that the pre-Easter faith was first legitimized through Christ's resurrection and parousia. However, if the resurrection is the *principal* and necessary condition of faith, then what legitimates a pre-Easter faith?

If, on the other hand, it is not faith but Jesus' authority that needs divine confirmation, then such confirmation is also christologically important because Jesus' resurrection means "at least partial fulfillment of Jesus' proclamation" (W. Pannenberg). But what, then, does this mean for Jesus' divinity and especially for the identity of the historical Jesus with the Easter Christ?

Critical questions arise when the confirmatory character of the resurrection is emphasized as necessary for legitimating faith, while not paying sufficient attention to the discontinuity of death on the cross or ignoring the distinction between the levels of confession and fact. An underestimation of the confirmatory character of Jesus' resurrection is just as problematic as an overestimation.

Willi Marxsen distinguishes between the NT Jesus-kerygma and the Christ-kerygma and thus connects faith in Jesus Christ with faith inspired by the earthly Jesus. The two kinds of faith are not essentially different because the amazement the historical Jesus inspired in his disciples was the same amazement that inspired the Christ-kerygma. Thus the earthly Lord and the exalted Lord are identical, and the resurrection means ("only") that "the cause of Jesus continues" and that faith goes on despite death on the cross. The transition from the historical Jesus to the Christ of faith thus means that there is no break in the apostolic

proclamation but, rather, a continuation of Jesus' proclamation against the background of the Easter experiences. The formative tradition was not faith in Jesus, but the faith awakened through Jesus. Thus "the decisive datum is not the resurrection but Jesus" himself and the history of the effect of the tradition (*Wirkungsgeschichte*); "the miracle is the birth of faith" (W. Marxsen).

If faith is understood as relationship to Jesus, then faith is basically independent of Easter. According to Marxsen, Jesus' eschatological authority should not need God's confirmation. If the emphasis lies entirely on the earthly Jesus, then Easter is no longer a central datum of the Christian faith. At most, the resurrection is the presupposition for the fact that Jesus' cause and faith continue despite death on the cross and that ever new relationships between Jesus and believers are established. But does not Jesus' resurrection introduce some new quality of revelation into the Christian faith? Does our faith actually discern nothing from eyewitnesses? Is not the apostolic faith the prerequisite for God's categorical revelation and thus the basis of our faith?

While for Pannenberg Jesus' resurrection means more than mere confirmation, Marxsen reduces the new that is established with and from Easter. Easter is merely the event of faith that interprets the ever new surprises of the Christ-kerygma. By contrast, there is the rich tradition of appearances that so forcefully proceeds from the Easter event. These appearances inspired faith and brought something significantly new into the Christ-event with respect to confirmatory evidence: the dialectic of concealment and revelation. The new experience that was conceived of as revelation underscored the identity between the historical Jesus and the resurrected Christ but also included something new. With the appearances came new experiences, namely, Jesus' "new coming as the one who had come

before" (K. Barth). The "new recognition in re-recognition" (H.-W. Winden) made it possible to develop early Christian christology and to realize that "history...had an eschatological function" (E. Käsemann). Jesus' person possessed eschatological qualities from the beginning, but on the basis of the resurrection these qualities were experienced in new and explicit ways in the faith consciousness of the disciples.

The NT appearance narratives verify that it was only after Easter that the apostles were totally aware of what had happened in, with, and under the salvation economy of Jesus' life: the fulfillment of all righteousness (Mt 3:15). The experience of the risen and exalted Christ mediated a new ability to see and to know and, in the light of Jesus' death on the cross, is the one overriding basis for legitimizing the Easter faith. Thus the pre-Easter appearance and life of Jesus does not mean that Jewish hopes and prophetic expectations were totally meaningless. Those expectations were "necessary [in consideration of the cross] but were not the sufficient ground for the origin of belief in Jesus' resurrection" (H. Kessler). The Easter faith is first constituted by the encounter with the crucified and risen Lord and is, therefore, the Easter faith's one sufficient ground. However, that encounter can be grasped only by faith. Only believers are open to the resurrection appearances.

The credibility of Jesus' resurrection

If, as a transcendental occurrence, the Easter event surpasses all history and is the ground of faith only for those who believe, how can the truth content of Jesus' resurrection be established? Is the Easter event a matter of belief alone? Cannot its truth content, as such, be mediated apart from belief in it? If not, then the Christian faith is not rationally responsible and is therefore arbitrary. The task of fundamental theology is to seek rational, credible grounds for the Christian faith,

despite faith's mysterious quality. In view of the resurrection, such grounds can be found by accentuating either historical or transcendental (anthropological) concepts.

For Karl Rahner, the anthropological content of the resurrection message is grounded in the fact that human hope in the resurrection is transcendental, and thus opens the realm within which the experience of Jesus' resurrection is possible:

An act of hope in one's own resurrection is something which takes place in every person by transcendental necessity either in the mode of free acceptance or of free rejection. For every person wants to survive in some final and definitive sense, and experiences this claim in his acts of freedom and responsibility, whether he is able to make this implication of the exercise of his freedom thematic or not, and whether he accepts it in faith or rejects it in despair. (*Foundations of Christian Faith*)

Exploring the phenomenon of freedom, which is aimed at eternity, Rahner provides anthropological access to the resurrection-faith. If we are not willing to believe, if we remain skeptical, nothing compels us to believe the disciples' Easter experience. There is much, however, that warrants belief.

Freedom is not the only phenomenon that opens transcendental access to the Easter event. Other human existentials that do so are human love (H. U. von Balthasar/J. Ratzinger) or hope (W. Pannenberg), especially the hope for justice (J. Moltmann). Such approaches are very helpful for showing the meaningfulness of Jesus' resurrection for human life in general and objective ways. But they do so that the meaning of the earthly Jesus' teaching and praxis and his Easter epiphanies are in the background. Thus transcendental theological hermeneutic needs to be complemented.

The credibility of the resurrection reality can also be shown historically. Historical criticism can establish the post-Easter change in Jesus' disciples, a change plausible only against the background of actual experience. In fact the Easter witness describes the personal encounter with the Easter Christ in his new existence so vividly that it indicates an experience fundamentally different from all other ecstatic experiences. The apostles were convinced that the encounter with the Risen Christ was neither a dream nor a mere subjective experience. They believed that the Lord lived bodily as the one who once had been crucified. According to Wolfhart Pannenberg,

If the emergence of primitive Christianity, which, apart from other traditions...can be understood in spite of all critical examination of the tradition only if one examines it in the light of the eschatological hope for a resurrection from the dead, then that which is so designated is a historical event, even if we do not know anything more particular about it. Then an event that is expressible only in the language of the eschatological expectation is to be asserted as a historical occurrence. (*Jesus—God and Man*)

Historicity also implies facticity, that an event actually occurred without having to stand in analogy to other occurrences. Historicity excludes neither different kinds of occurrences nor the possibility of disputing that something is historical, as long as the occurrences await eschatological confirmation.

Jürgen Moltmann argues that Jesus' resurrection

is to be called "historic," not because it took place *in* the history to which other categories of some sort provide a key, but it is to be called historic be-

cause, by pointing the way for future events, it *makes* history in which we can and must live. It is historic, because it discloses an eschatological future. (*Theology of Hope*)

The historical credibility of the resurrection is founded in the efficacious power of the kerygma of the Risen Christ. But what is the theological relationship of the Christ-kerygma to the message of the historical Jesus?

Beyond the history of the reception of the effect of the Easter event (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), a fundamental theology that sees the resurrection as confirmation of Jesus' life and praxis must also take seriously the life and pragmatic of the earthly Jesus. Thus, not only the content but also the pragmatic meaning of Jesus' word and work needs to be recovered. Such a comprehensive evaluation of the NT witness is the task of reconstructive hermeneutics (F. Schüssler Fiorenza).

The resurrection witness connects historical accessibility (the proclamation and execution of the earthly Jesus) on the one side, with, on the other side, the historical inaccessibility of the early Christian Easter kerygma (Jesus is newly risen from the dead). The success of this connection is what establishes faith's credibility. "For many Christians the NT witness is the most plausible explanation for what has happened and has the greatest power for explaining the origin of faith in Jesus" (F. Schüssler Fiorenza). The most consistent connection for the transmission of the resurrection witness is the basis for faith. The investigation of literary forms shows that the primary intention of the resurrection reports is that the Risen Christ's entirely new unity with God be identified with the historical Jesus, while the eulogies and faith formulae express, above all, personal and communal feelings.

What Jesus' resurrection means can be discovered only in the linguistic expressions of the Easter event found in the wit-

ness of Jesus' disciples. Here one can recognize the retroductive legitimations which undergird the resurrection faith—consolation in terms of individual immortality, the establishment of a social community, and a context for understanding the world's injustice.

Throughout the course of church history, fundamental theology has seen a variety of arguments concerning Jesus' resurrection. The apologetic approach, which ran counter to the intention of the biblical texts by concentrating solely on the empty tomb, has proved inadequate. Rather, the biblical witness is to be understood in terms of texts which not only point to the object of faith but at the same time provide the basis for faith.

The transcendental theological argument for the credibility of Jesus' resurrection opens a general, abstract avenue and a first horizon for an understanding of the resurrection that accords with human reason. Nevertheless, more attention needs to be given to history. The anthropological avenue has to be complemented with the investigation of the Easter tradition. Anthropology can help make the historical truth content of the resurrection events discernible. However, the unique reality of Easter, what is specifically Christian about it, cannot be known through the anthropological approach either. Here, the biblical witnesses themselves must be questioned and the meaning of the Easter witness reconstructed and analyzed according to its retroductive legitimations. It is not only the content (the intention of the resurrection witness) that is decisive but also its meaning—the pragmatic aspect of Jesus' resurrection as it has been expressed in the Easter witness. The hermeneutics of reception investigates how the Easter appearances stand in relationship to Jesus' earthly life and praxis.

Fundamental theology can carry out its

task in a variety of ways, provided that all of them come to the overarching conviction that every ground of faith is always also faith's object. "The overriding basis for the (Easter) faith" (H. Kessler) is solely the historical revelatory event of God, "who gives life to the dead" (Rom 4:17) and who "raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Rom 4:24). The constituting and legitimating basis for faith is found in God, who reveals himself in Jesus, the resurrected Christ and exalted Kyrios. This revelatory event—mediated in the biblical and ecclesial witness—can be known and experienced, finally, only in the grace-filled, free exercise of faith. Nevertheless, the truth of faith

statements about Jesus' resurrection can be demonstrated also to non-believers through anthropology or the hermeneutics of reconstruction, where grasping the truth of such statements is at least hypothetically conceivable. In no way, however, does such demonstration of faith's credibility remove the risk of faith or replace people's personal, existential faith experiences. The faith experience that the Risen Christ is living and present in the faith community is the most complete and meaningful confirmation of the resurrection truth. This truth, then, needs to be demonstrated in ever new ways by practicing—for oneself and for others—the Easter life. (BAA)