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# The Easter Event: reality or symbolism?

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"What would you say on Easter Sunday morning?" I asked. Without hesitation ...

*"I'd say that Jesus was a baby," he replied. "A baby who grew up and became a man. And that's what we're about in this world — the making of men. Most people see him as an apparition of an apparencey, not as true flesh and blood; but I see him as a real person, like you and me. Anyone would have gone to the cross if he knew that in three days he would rise again. But he went to the cross alone and abandoned, for it was God who did the raising. You ask me to show you a man ... and I won't show you Luther, or Augustine, or Calvin, or Wesley. You ask me to show you a man, and I'll show you Jesus Christ ... for in Him, I discover who I am."*

Only a few can say it like Carlyle Marney, eminent Southern Baptist theologian, and only Southern Baptist minister in the 20th century to gain international recognition. Marney is dead now, and at great loss to Christendom, yet from the north side of Wolf-Pen Mountain, he left a legacy of

enduring truths. I knew that day, over a decade ago now, that I had heard it from the best. I knew, too, that I would never forget what he said to me that morning, and that I would later quote him verbatim, using his powerful cadence and rhythm. If only he were still alive, there might today be a good Easter sermon. But who among us has heard one? And where is the preacher who will boast that his sermon on Easter was what he had hoped it would be?

Yet every true minister of the faith begins his Easter sermon with the assumption that the Resurrection is ... and must be preached. It is so! Jesus Christ is risen! And many on Easter Sunday will come, and listen, and agonize with the preacher, man or woman, who tries to explain or testify to the Easter event.

On one corner, behind the pulpit stands a minister who seeks to historically verify the Resurrection. With painstaking honesty, he recounts the traditions, tells the stories and quotes the scriptures. He uses everything at his disposal to substantiate positions, to verify

possibilities and to offer proofs. It is not unusual to hear him speak of the shroud of Turin, nor tell of those who died briefly, visited the "other" side and returned to recall their experiences of light and love and peace. Beyond these explanations, what cannot be understood must be accepted, he says. However, he is not totally convincing, for he has passed over many of the hard questions. The sermon ends, nothing is really affected or changed, and some go away shaking their heads.

At the same time, on an opposite corner, another mounts the pulpit and skillfully speaks of the symbols of the Resurrection. He presents an ingenious array of parallels, configurations and meanings. According to him, true faith in God need not be encumbered by belief in a revived body, or a tomb's emptiness, or a Christ's re-appearance. Modern man must be schizophrenic to use the telephone, watch television, program computers and, at the same time, believe in the resuscitation of a human corpse. He concludes that only a spiritual interpretation can fit this event. Some marvel at the insight of his penetration, others regret that those accounts which had puzzled them for years were suddenly made to disappear behind the points of meaning and purpose. He is not totally convincing, for a few wonder if there might not be more substance in those ancient stories. The sermon ends, nothing is really affected or changed, and some go away shaking their heads.

These two approaches will always send folk away shaking their heads and wondering, "Where's the Truth?" For both go at the Easter event the wrong way, and hearers are left only with confusion and uncertainty. No one can prove or disprove the Resurrection. It defies such efforts. The Easter event is never an issue of belief or disbelief; it is always a matter of encounter and impact. We will remain confused each

and every time we approach the Resurrection with a scientific view. Even the early Christians had not the slightest idea what happened in the tomb. They first believed that someone had stolen Jesus' body. It was only later that the Easter experience became for them a matter of acceptance and encounter, what we call in the Christian church, "Faith."

I may believe that I have seen an apparition or an apparencey, and then go away unchanged. But what if this supposed apparition actually comes through the door of my house and causes me to believe that a new beginning has been offered me; causes me to know that I am compelled by his love to love everyone; causes me to know that my behavior is transfigured by my continuing repentance and new faith; causes me to know that some hymn, or set of eyes, or touch, or prayer may command me to new venture; causes me to understand that I live always between His death and my resurrection.

So where is the truth surrounding the Easter event? The truth rests solely in the certainty of an encounter that is intensely personal. It is an encounter with a risen Lord! The same encounter that sent the apostles on their way confessing Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. So Jesus is not merely a beautiful memory; He is a present reality.

My friend and mentor left me one other word. He once remarked that sometimes he did not believe in the Resurrection — but he did the day his father died. Yes, there are days (in Marney's words) when we seem to have no resurrection faith at all. Yet God is always rolling away the stone at the door of the tomb — to show that the grave is empty indeed — to show that God's people need never feel defeated. For God is a God of life — not of death.