



## **Can I Get a Witness? Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 118:14-29; John 20:19-31 Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (April 24, 2022)**

Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. And just because it's hard to believe, it doesn't mean it isn't true.

Nobody in their right mind would think that vending machines are 4 times deadlier than sharks.<sup>1</sup> And yet, according to a 1995 report by the US Consumer Product Safety Commission, it is true. This comprehensive review of available data states that from 1978 to 1995 a total of 37 Americans were killed by falling vending machines, meaning a little over 2 deaths per year. The deaths have resulted from consumers rocking or tilting the machines in an attempt to obtain free soda or money.

Did you know that the t-shirt was invented in 1904 and it was primarily marketed towards bachelors as "bachelor undershirt." It was stretchy enough to be pulled over the head. One of the first ads for the T-shirt's read, "No safety pins - no buttons - no needle - no thread." The slogan aimed at men with no wives and no sewing skills. Within a year, the T-shirt became extremely popular with thousands of bachelors as well as married men favoring it over any other garment.<sup>2</sup>

It's not too hard to find stories and fun facts on the internet to impress people at parties and hold small talk. It's true that the internet is filled with millions of facts that are both true and hard to believe. It is equally true that there is much disinformation on the internet, and one needs to be extremely careful and critical of the information collected.<sup>3</sup>

The various gospel accounts of the resurrection and appearances of Jesus to the disciples reflect a truth that is hard to believe. The disciples did not know how to react to the story and what to make of it. Two thousand years later, we encounter the same difficulty. If it weren't that difficult, well, why don't we talk more about it? If we don't tell the story, is it because we doubt the event? Or maybe because we are all too aware of our shortcomings and distrust our own credibility? Is it perhaps that we are not confident about our ability to articulate a convincing statement?

Even those who saw and experienced the resurrection firsthand could not believe their eyes. Jesus announced to them several times both his crucifixion and his resurrection, but they fail to remember and to understand. Perhaps the beauty of having so many accounts of the resurrection is because of the stubbornness of the disciples. The many multi-sensorial appearances also tell us

---

<sup>1</sup> [Vending Machines vs Sharks — what's deadlier? | by Raghav Mittal | Purple Theory | Medium](#)

<sup>2</sup> [18 Unbelievably Hard To Believe Facts \(mind-blowingfacts.com\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [What to know about disinformation and how to address it | Stanford News](#) and [The internet is a wasteland of disinformation. Here's how to fix it. - CBS News](#)

that each disciple experienced the resurrection differently. In fact, Jesus revealed himself in ways respectful of the disciples' personal story and readiness to accept the news. Jesus wanted that the encounter with the risen Lord would make sense to them. For forty days until the Ascension to the Father, Jesus appears to his disciples giving them ample space and time to adjust to the new reality. Easter is not just a day but a whole season. Liturgically, it lasts up to Pentecost. In our life, it runs from our resurrection at the time we embrace Jesus to eternity.

In the gospel of John alone, we have several accounts of the disciples encountering the risen Christ. Mary Magdalene arrives to the tomb when it's still dark on that first day of the week and finds it empty. She runs back to where she knows the disciples are staying, gives them the news, and then returns to the tomb with Peter and another disciple. So far, there has been no encounter with the risen Lord. We are left to imagine only Peter's and Mary's distress. The other disciple is reported to have peered into the tomb and, upon seeing the now useless burial clothes, believes.

While sobbing in the garden near the tomb, Mary sees angels and then Jesus, but she does not recognize him. The failure to recognize the risen Lord, a common feature in the gospels, is only overcome when Jesus calls Mary by name and sends her back to the disciples with the news of the resurrection. So, the one who in the beginning of the story announces: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb," is now the first to make a statement of faith: "I have seen the Lord!"

That very evening, the risen Jesus appears to the shaken-in-their-boots disciples locked in the upper room and grants them the peace promised them which the world (meaning Caesar) cannot give (Jn 14:27). The news of his resurrection given to them by Mary and the beloved disciple in the morning has not yet sunk in. Fear and hiding still mark the life of the disciples. In this passage, Jesus is both clearly corporeal (bodily) but in a transformed way so that he is unconstrained by the limits of the physical world and can come and go as he pleases.

Jesus stands in their midst, shows them his wounds, gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit, and commissions them to bring reconciliation to a broken world. With this empowerment, he shares with them the ability to forgive sin (Jn 1:29; 1 Jn 2:1-2). Whoever sees the disciples and receives their word sees and receives Jesus who sent them as he was sent by the Father.

Here we see them transformed by the joyous experience of the resurrection. A fear-stricken community that has given up on the possibilities for life, that has lost faith in the gospel that Jesus preached, is called back into life-giving ministry.

But Thomas, who is not in the room, misses the joyous event. He refuses to believe his friends unless he can put his finger in Jesus' wounds. Are they not convincing in their witness or is Thomas just thick-headed? We know from previous stories that he does not stand out as the brightest of the group (see Jn 11:16 and 14:5). Maybe, he was just tired and disappointed. Or maybe he was angry at how life has turned for all of them. Or maybe simply angry that he has missed out on the encounter.

One week later, Jesus returns to the same house where the disciples are gathered and this time even Thomas is present. Jesus offers him his side and his hands. Thomas grasps the terrifying, wondrously scandalous truth that Jesus reveals that God is not exempt from suffering. He realizes that God's forgiveness expresses a love as vulnerable as human beings' and more powerful than evil. At this point Thomas does not need empirical evidence and is ready to offer his own statement of faith.

What about us? What do we individually need to believe? What are we expecting will need to happen for us to have a profound inner revolution?

Are those wrong questions to ask? After all, the disciples didn't go to Jesus with a clear request of revealing himself to them in this way or that. It was Jesus' choice to do that based on his knowledge of them. Yet, we are post-resurrection people, are we to ignore his reassuring words regarding prayer, the times when he encouraged his disciples to "Ask and you shall receive." (John 16:24-27) or "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever you will, and it shall be done unto you." (John 15:7)? This is, in fact, Jesus' will, "that whoever believes in [in the Son of God] should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16).

And yet, how difficult it still is to believe, two thousand years after the fact and with the benefit of the written accounts and the witness of the saints who have preceded us. In our post-modern world, in our internet age, we still have a hard time believing the death and resurrection of Christ, even though he had announced it and gone through it. We still value reasoning above faith; proof over mystery. We still favor science over miracle. Is that why we don't ask Jesus to give us the daily dose of bread necessary to live in faith, to live as risen people?

Jesus is not opposed to evidence-based faith. In fact, without your inner conviction of how the Lord has touched you, how else would you talk about him changing your life?

Jesus blesses those who even though haven't seen him risen still believe. That's us, born generations after the event itself. The historical resurrection of Jesus has happened over two thousand years ago, and we can't possibly be eyewitnesses to that. But we can be eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection in *us*, in fact we *must* if we want to move from a faith in what others tell us about Jesus to a faith born out of our personal encounter with him (John 4:42).

South African Anglican bishop and theologian Desmond Tutu shares an experience he had when gathered with other church leaders during the most difficult days of apartheid:

"We met at a theological college that had closed down because of the government's racist policies. During our discussions I went into the...garden for some quiet. There was a huge... wooden cross without a corpus, but with protruding nails and crown of thorns. It was a stark symbol of the Christian faith. It was winter: the grass was pale and dry and nobody would have believed that in a few weeks' time it would be lush and green and beautiful again. It would be transfigured.

As I sat quietly in the garden I realized the power of transfiguration—of God's transformation—in our world. The principle of transfiguration is at work when something so unlikely as the brown grass that covers our grassland in winter becomes bright green again. Or when the tree with gnarled leafless branches bursts forth with the sap flowing so that the birds sit chirping in the leafy branches. Or when the once dry streams gurgle with swift-flowing water. When winter gives way to spring and nature seems to experience its own resurrection.

The principle of transfiguration says nothing, no one and no situation, is "untransfigurable," that the whole of creation, nature, waits expectantly for its transfiguration, when it will be released from its bondage and share in the glorious liberty of the children of God, when it will not be just dry inert matter but will be translucent with divine glory...

All over this magnificent world God calls us to extend [God's] kingdom of shalom—peace and wholeness—of justice, of goodness, of compassion, of caring, of sharing, of laughter, of joy, and of reconciliation. God is transfiguring the world right this very moment through us because God believes in us and because God loves us. What can separate us from the love of God? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And as we share God's love with our brothers and sisters, God's other children, there is no tyrant who can resist us, no oppression that cannot be ended, no hunger that cannot be fed, no wound that cannot be healed, no hatred that cannot be turned to love, no dream that cannot be fulfilled."<sup>4</sup>

During the Season of Easter, we greet each other with the triumphant sentence: "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed." I like that greeting. It affirms our hope. This year, I have come to realize that it's time to complete that greeting: Christ is risen. He is risen indeed *and now it's our turn!*

Franciscan priest and spiritual guide, Fr. Richard Rohr, reflects: "The message of Easter is not primarily a message about Jesus' body, although we've been trained to limit it to this one-time "miracle." We've been educated to expect a lone, risen Jesus saying, "I rose from the dead; look at me!" I'm afraid that's why many people, even Christians, don't really seem to get too excited about Easter... Sadly, the Western church...emphasized the individual resurrection of Jesus.

But there's a great secret, at least for Western Christians, hidden in the other half of the universal church. In the Eastern Orthodox Church—in places like Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Egypt—Easter is not usually painted with a solitary Jesus rising from the dead. He's always surrounded by crowds of people—both haloed and unhaloed.

So, the Eastern Church was probably much closer to the truth that the resurrection is a message about humanity. It's a message about history. It's a corporate message, and it includes you and me and everyone else. If that isn't true, it's no wonder that we basically lost interest.

As XIII c. theologian, Thomas Aquinas, teaches, there are two resurrections: the first is waking up in this lifetime; if we do this, the second will take care of itself.

Easter is about our resurrection: Christ needs to truly arise in us. Paul says this plainly when he writes: "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Because of that, the apostle Paul writes:

"So, if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your[a] life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory." (Colossians 3:1-4)

Resurrection starts with living a virtuous life. We don't need to be articulate with our words. It's sufficient that our life tells a different story with the choices we make based on kindness, respect, forgiveness, and compassion. It's enough to channel God's grace when we choose simplicity and humility.

May we so abide in Christ that his resurrection may truly be evident in us. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 1-3, 128.