

EASTER, 2014

It is easy enough for those of us who have grown up as Christians to accept the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as an important aspect of our faith, as something that we rightly expect to be found in the Nicene Creed that is regularly recited at Mass on Sundays and solemnities, but it may take someone from outside our religious tradition to grasp the absolute centrality of the resurrection. A few years ago, many of the world's bishops gathered in Rome for a synod on the new evangelization. At one point, a bishop from India recounted a story about a Hindu teenager who had gone to him to ask about Christianity. The bishop spoke to him briefly, gave him some things to read about Christianity, and suggested that he come back to talk further after he had gone through this material. To his surprise, the young man showed up already the next day, quite upset and even angry at the bishop. "I read here," he said, "that this Jesus was raised from the dead. Why didn't you tell me this yesterday?"

Well, that young man "got it." You wouldn't have any trouble convincing someone like that why Easter is the most important feast in the Church's year. But we should also admit that not everyone would necessarily have the same reaction in reading that Jesus was raised from the dead. More skeptical persons might ask what grounds there are for believing what is reported at the end of each of the four Gospels. After all, when St. Paul preached about the resurrection at Athens, he got a very tepid response from most of his hearers. In our own day, various skeptics point to some differences among the Gospel accounts (such as just how many women went to the tomb) as reasons for their skepticism. An extreme position, not concerning the resurrection directly but rather the ongoing presence of the risen Jesus to our world, appeared not long ago in an essay by a rabbi titled "The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish View." It reads as follows:

If Jesus appeared surrounded by hosts of angels trailing clouds of glory and announcing his Messiahship for all to see, this would certainly be compelling. But it would have to take place in

the public domain. Such an event would have to be witnessed by multitudes, photographed, recorded on video cameras, shown on television, and announced in newspapers and magazines worldwide.... Further, if as a consequence of his arrival, all the prophecies recorded in the scriptures were fulfilled ... [then] I would without doubt embrace the Christian message and become a follower of the risen Christ.¹

I read those lines not to single that man out as a modern doubting Thomas but rather to help us reflect on just what grounds our own faith. What Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok was asking for there would, in his own words, be "compelling" and therefore leave no room for faith at all, and yet the Church has never gone to the other extreme and spoken of faith as some blind, irrational leap into the dark. The Australian theologian Gerald O'Collins has written some wonderful books and articles showing the positive role of historical research in such matters, but he also acknowledges the limits of such study. In the final analysis, those of us who have received the precious gift of faith accept the trustworthiness of those early witnesses whose testimony has been passed down from generation to generation. But if that testimony is crucial, it does not stand alone but is supported by what another fine theologian, Jon Sobrino, has called experiences of something almost ultimate breaking into our situation, experiences that to some extent re-create the experience of the resurrection. He is talking about ways in which the same Good News that led St. Paul to face monumental obstacles in his own life have shown up in the lives of people today, perhaps especially in the lives of those who, from a worldly perspective, seem to have little for which to be thankful. Let me give an example.

When civil war was raging at its fiercest in El Salvador several decades ago, it was common for the *campesinos* to say things like the following: "What we are clear about is that God has not abandoned us and will never abandon us. We have been able to experience his closeness and his presence with us at the hardest moments we have been through in the course of this war, when the only thing that has been offered us is death. God has offered and given us life."² And as is so often the case, those who come from other countries to assist people caught up in such conflicts regularly say that they received more than they could give. A medical doctor who came to El Salvador during that war said: "All the time I felt the pain of the daily life of the poor in the shanty towns and the rural areas. It was in the

midst of this pain that I discovered something of what I was searching for, a God who ... walks with his people and who still suffers alongside those who suffer."³ Similarly, a North American religious sister wrote: "Seeing the faces, listening to the stories, my heart cannot stop hurting. But I am not sad.... I find myself learning from these people what I had always hoped to be true: that love is stronger than death."⁴

As Fr. Sobrino notes, no such experiences "can fully reproduce the appearances [of the risen Lord] narrated in the gospels. None of them can compel acceptance of the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection. But they can help us to understand--from their present-day *reality*--what the disciples affirm as a *real* thing: the crucified Jesus appeared to them raised."⁵ Such experiences are indeed real, and can serve as something of modern-day analogies to the resurrection just as in the Hebrew scriptures the accounts of Israel's liberation from Egypt or of the boy Isaac's being given life after lying at the very point of death serve as analogies that prefigure the resurrection. The final word in all of them is what that North American sister noted: love, love that is stronger than death. We see it in God's love for his people enslaved in Egypt; God's love for the boy Isaac and, indeed, for the father who was on the verge of doing a truly awful deed; God's vindicating love for Jesus in raising him to new life; God's love for the poor and abandoned of our own time; and God's nurturing and loving call for us to be with them in their suffering in whatever ways we can. One of the more recent martyrs in El Salvador, Ignacio Ellacuría, once told a group of young Jesuits preparing to make their vows that they were being called to live as "risen beings," by which he meant persons who would be fearless in the face of danger and joyful in the midst of oppression. The earliest disciples became fearless once they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, St. Paul was fearless in facing persecution and death in countless ways, and so many martyrs of recent decades have been equally fearless, such a Fr. Ellacuría's fellow Salvadoran Oscar Romero, of whom it has been said:

Not only was he free to speak the truth to everyone, including himself, but nothing prevented him from doing good. He was not deterred by threats against his own person, or by ... bombs in the archdiocesan radio station and printing works, in Catholic schools, in the university, in

clerical and lay residences, in seminaries. Not only this, but he had to accept the assassination of the major symbols of the church: priests, religious, catechists,... seminarians. But he did not give in, and this showed him to be a free man: nothing stood between him, as a person and as archbishop, and his love of the poor.⁶

Nothing can or should prevent us from manifesting the same freedom in our own lives, all the more since our circumstances are generally far less fraught with risk to our own lives. May we go forth from this service transformed--indeed, wanting to be transformed--by the grace and power of the risen Lord Jesus.

1" Dan Cohn-Sherbok, "The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish View," in *Resurrection Reconsidered*, ed. G. D'Costa Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 198.

2" Quoted by Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 15.

3" P.W. Gyves, quoted *ibid.*, 71.

4" Letter by Ann Manganaro, quoted *ibid.*

5" Sobrino, 73.

6" *Ibid.*, 76.